HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

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

Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs—The Rt. Hon Jeremy Hunt, MP
Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP
Secretary of State for Defence—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
Secretary of State for Education—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP
Secretary of State for Transport—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords—The Rt Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
Secretary of State for Scotland—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP
Secretary of State for Wales—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP
Secretary of State for International Development and Minister for Women and Equalities—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP
Minister without Portfolio—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—
Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
Ministers of State—
  Rt Hon. Claire Perry, MP (Minister for Energy and Clean Growth)
  Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §
Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
  Kelly Tolhurst, MP
  Andrew Stephenson, MP
  The Rt Hon. Lord Henley

Cabinet Office—
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP
Parliamentary Secretaries—
  Oliver Dowden, MP
  Chloe Smith, MP
  Kevin Foster, MP §

Defence—
Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP
Ministers of State—
  The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §
  The Rt Hon. Mark Lancaster, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)
Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
  The Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, MP
  Stuart Andrew, MP

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—
Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP
Minister of State—Margot James, MP (Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries)
Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
  Lord Ashton of Hyde
  Michael Ellis, MP
  Mims Davies, MP
Education

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
  The Rt Hon. Nick Gibb, MP (Minister for School Standards)
  The Rt Hon. Anne Milton, MP (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills)
  Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of STATE—
  Lord Agnew of Oulton
  Nadhim Zahawi, MP

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Robert Goodwill, MP (Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of STATE—
  Thérèse Coffey, MP
  Lord Gardiner of Kimble
  David Rutley, MP

Exiting the European Union

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Callanan
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of STATE—
  Robin Walker, MP
  James Cleverly, MP
  Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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

Health and Social Care

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
  Stephen Hammond, MP (Minister for Health)
  Caroline Dinenage, MP (Minister for Care)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of STATE—
  Seema Kennedy, MP
  Jackie Doyle-Price, MP
  Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford

Home Office

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

Housing, Communities and Local Government

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

International Development

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

Justice—
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Rory Stewart, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SecretARIES OF STATE—
Lucy Frazer, QC, MP
Edward Argar, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

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

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

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

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

Transport—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Jesse Norman, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SecretARIES OF STATE—
Nusrat Ghani, MP §
Andrew Jones, MP
Baroness Vere of Norbiton §

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

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

ASSISTANT WHIPS—
Nusrat Ghani, MP §
Iain Stewart, MP
Jo Churchill, MP
Amanda Milling, MP
Michelle Donelan, MP
Matt Warman, MP
Wendy Morton, MP
Kevin Foster, MP §
UK Export Finance
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
Minister for Trade and Export Promotion—Baroness Fairhead

Wales Office
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF STATE—
Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §
Kevin Foster, MP §

Work and Pensions
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
Alok Sharma, MP (Minister for Employment)
Justin Tomlinson, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF STATE—
Guy Opperman, MP
Baroness Buscombe
Will Quince, MP

Office of the Leader of the House of Lords
LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

Her Majesty’s Household
LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Earl Peel GCVO, DL
LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Dalhousie
MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord Vestey KCVO
TREASURER—Christopher Pincher, MP
COMPTROLLER—Mark Spencer, MP
VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Craig Whittaker, MP
CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Taylor of Holbeach CBE
CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN’S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown
BARONESSES IN WAITING—Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Baroness Sugg CBE §, Baroness Goldie DL, Baroness Barran MBE, Baroness Stedman-Scott DL, Baroness Manzoor CBE
LORDS IN WAITING—Viscount Younger of Leckie, The Rt Hon. Lord Young of Cookham CH

§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

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

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. John Bercow, MP
CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP
FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing, MP
SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS
Sir David Amess, Ian Austin, Mr Adrian Bailey, Sir Henry Bellingham, Mr Clive Betts, Mr Peter Bone,
Sir Graham Brady, Ms Karen Buck, Sir Christopher Chope, Sir David Crausby, Geraint Davies, Philip Davies,
Ms Nadine Dorries, Mr Nigel Evans, Sir Roger Gale, Mike Gapes, The Rt Hon. Dame Cheryl Gillan, James Gray,
The Rt Hon. David Hanson, Mr Philip Hollobone, Stewart Hosie, The Rt Hon. Mr George Howarth, Sir Edward
Leigh, Mrs Anne Main, Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Albert Owen, Ian Paisley,
Mark Pritchard, Mr Laurence Robertson, Andrew Rosindell, The Rt Hon. Joan Ryan, Mr Virendra Sharma,
Mr Gary Streeter, Graham Stringer, Mr Charles Walker, Phil Wilson

SECRETARY—Colin Lee

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION
The Rt Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons),
Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Sir Paul Beresford, MP,
The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Stewart Hosie, MP, The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom, MP (Leader of the House),
Dr Rima Makarem (External Member), Jane McCall (External Member), Valerie Vaz, MP,
The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP.

SECRETARY OF THE COMMISSION—Marianne Cwynarski

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Robert Cope

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE
Dr Rima Makarem (Chair), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, Mr Clive Betts, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP,
Jane McCall, Bob Scruton

SECRETARY—John-Paul Flaherty

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD
Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Carlos Bamford (Managing Director, In-House Services),
Myfanwy Barrett (Managing Director, Corporate Services and Finance Director), Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Sarah Davies (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Committees), David Hemming (Managing Director, Strategic Estates), Eric Hepburn (Director of Security for Parliament), Tracey Jessup (Director of the Parliamentary Digital Service),
Dr Edge Watchorn (Managing Director, Participation), Penny Young (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information)

SECRETARY OF THE BOARD—Rhiannon Hollis

SPEAKER’S SECRETARY—Peter Barratt
SPEAKER’S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi
SPEAKER’S CHAPLAIN—Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Kathryn Stone
House of Commons

Monday 29 April 2019

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

School Exclusions: Timpson Review

2. Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): What progress has been made on the Timpson review of school exclusions.

5. James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): What progress has been made on the Timpson review of school exclusions.

12. Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What progress has been made on the Timpson review of school exclusions.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): I am very grateful to Edward Timpson for the thorough work he has been leading on exclusions. The review has gathered substantial evidence and will report shortly, and I will then respond.

Sarah Jones: The all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which I chair, found through an extensive freedom of information request that a third of local authorities have no space left in their pupil referral units. We know that excluded children who are not offered a full-time place at a pupil referral unit are at an increased risk of being involved in crime. We were told that the Timpson review was finalised last year. We are still waiting for a publication date to be confirmed. When will the Secretary of State confirm that date, and when will the Government act?

Damian Hinds: I commend the hon. Lady for the work that she and her colleagues do on the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which is a terrible scourge for us all to grapple with. I am not in a position to give her a date for publication of the Timpson review. It will be soon, but we have to be careful not to draw a simple causal link between exclusions and knife crime.

James Frith: According to the most recent figures collected by the Education Policy Institute, in one year nearly 55,000 children have disappeared from school rolls without explanation. The Secretary of State cannot tell us why, nor can he for those excluded officially, because his Department collects no further information on them. While we wait for Timpson to report, will the Secretary of State commit to my call—one that is supported by Ofsted, the National Education Union and many people across education—to scrap the “other” category as a reason for exclusion, which now represents 20% of exclusions in our schools on his watch?

Damian Hinds: To continue the theme of simple links that should not be drawn, it would be wrong to associate that figure of 55,000 with any one category. There are many reasons why children may be taken out of school—for example, emigration. We are concerned, of course, about exclusions. That is why I invited Edward Timpson to carry out this review. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt what he has to say. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt what he has to say, but we will report back soon.

Ellie Reeves: As well as having concerns about delays to the review, I am concerned about other forms of exclusion that may fall out of scope. I am aware in my constituency of the use of isolation units in schools, where students are removed from lessons and placed in
Damian Hinds: I know that there was a good debate on related matters recently in the House. We support headteachers and schools in making decisions on proportionate use of behaviour management. It is important that that is proportionate, but headteachers and schools are generally in the best position to make those judgments. We also issue guidance from the centre, which we keep under review.

David T. C. Davies: What message does the Secretary of State have for those who volunteer to exclude themselves from school to take part in climate change protests, given that they seem disproportionately likely to attend schools that are fond of organising long-haul flights across the world to take part in ski trips, social visits and even a netball match in Barbados in one case?

Damian Hinds: I am delighted when children and young people take an active interest in these incredibly important issues, and on a number of environmental topics children and young people have very much taken the lead, but my message to them is: on a Friday afternoon, the best place for you to be is in school. That is where you can learn to be a climate scientist or an engineer and solve these problems in the future. Being absent from school tends to disrupt learning for others and causes an additional workload for your teachers.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Does the Minister not know that, over several years, we have seen how the push to study for early years testing has really pushed the practical and the creative out of our schools?

Nadhim Zahawi: Creative and practical subjects form a key part of the early years foundation stage statutory framework, which is mandatory for all early years providers, including of course schools.

Mr Barry Sheerman: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that art, drama and music are crucial to a balanced and broad education and should therefore be encouraged in all our schools?

Nadhim Zahawi: I would certainly talk to Tristram Hunt. Expressive arts and design is one of the seven areas of learning set out in the early years foundation stage statutory framework, and it involves exploring and using media and materials, and being imaginative, including through design and technology, art, music, dance, role play and stories.

Mike Kane: The Secretary of State surely knows that he lost nearly 9,500 pupils on his watch last year. They went off roll, and we had no idea where they went. Following on from the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith), one in 12 pupils who began secondary school in 2012 and finished in 2017 were removed from school rolls. Given the scale of the problem, will the Secretary of State not tell us when the Timpson review will be published and commit to Labour’s pledge that schools should retain responsibility for the results of the pupils they exclude?

Damian Hinds: I have not ruled that out, as the hon. Gentleman will know. I am sure he will join me in welcoming the consultation we have put out on children not in school and on maintaining a register of children not in school, including the duty to make sure that extra help is provided for home educating parents, where they seek it. There have always been absences from school, as he will know. We have made great progress over the years on absence and persistent absence from school, but we need to make sure that more is done.

Creative Projects: Early Years Experience

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps is he taking to help ensure that creative and practical projects are part of the early years experience in schools.

Mr Sheerman: I have some experience in this area, as the former Chair of the Select Committee on Education. Is the Minister not aware that, over several years, we have seen how the push to study for early years testing has really pushed the practical and the creative out of the classroom, and could we bring it back? Will the Minister talk to Tristram Hunt, who is the director of the Victoria & Albert Museum, which has learning hubs, practical hubs and making hubs, and learn from his experience?

Nadhim Zahawi: Education and should therefore be encouraged in all our schools?
Nadhim Zahawi: I do, indeed, agree with my right hon. Friend. Between 2016 and 2020, we are spending almost £500 million on a range of music and creative arts programmes.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), does the Minister not accept that the emphasis on testing only English and maths—not just in primary school, but throughout—is having a detrimental effect on experiential learning, project learning and creating people with a lust for learning, not those who can just regurgitate facts?

Nadhim Zahawi: No teacher or school leader would disagree about the lust for learning and making learning fun, but testing is the building block that allows us to make the investment and have the focus necessary to produce the extraordinary results that we are producing for children and families up and down the country.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the early years stage should include a broad range of learning goals, including communication, physical development and self-confidence, as well as of course a thirst for knowledge?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly do. Our proposals retain 17 early learning goals to reflect the breadth of the current early years foundation stage approach as well.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Good-quality music tuition builds our young people’s creativity, skills and mental wellbeing. Accessing it is a challenge in poorer communities such as my own. What assessment have Ministers made of an arts pupil premium to level this imbalance?

Nadhim Zahawi: Art, music and design are compulsory in all maintained schools from age five to age 14. All schools, including academies, are required to provide a broad and balanced curriculum.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Will my hon. Friend ensure that digital and IT skills play a role in the early years curriculum to ensure that our young people encounter early on the technologies that they will need to become familiar with as they progress through school?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly agree; I know that my hon. Friend is a passionate advocate of IT literacy.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), for visiting Space Studio West London in my constituency to see young people making robots and getting involved in other engineering projects such as sustainable energy. My mobile phone was charged wirelessly this morning by an invention of theirs.

Does the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), agree that employability comes from having practical learning? Will he join me in trying to make sure that creativity is encouraged in all our schools? Will he support my arts and makers fair, which will showcase work by young people across Hounslow?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly agree with all that. I will certainly support the fair that the hon. Lady plans in her area, and I am sure that my colleagues would join me in visiting it.

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly agree with all that. I will certainly support the fair that the hon. Lady plans in her area, and I am sure that my colleagues would join me in visiting it.

Mr Speaker: That sounds very exciting. I must say, I have been to the hon. Lady’s constituency a number of times, but I have merely spoken. The notion that I might create a robot has never been put to me—thankfully.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister may be aware of the recent “Sounds of Intent” report, which showed that targeted music lessons for under-fives helps close the gap, particularly in deprived areas and for children with complex needs. Can the Minister tell us whether he believes that every child should have access to music while at nursery? If so, what audit is he doing on quality? He may agree that putting a CD on at Christmas is very different from having a professional come in on a weekly basis. If he believes that quality is important, what is he doing to ensure that music has a greater role in the early years foundation stage?

Nadhim Zahawi: We plan to spend around £3.5 billion on early education entitlements this year alone, and that targets the most disadvantaged in society. The hon. Lady rightly mentions music, which is very much part of the creative portfolio that children under five should be enjoying. Part of our funding, of course, is for making sure that we deliver all that and more in our fantastic early years provision.

Immigration Legislation: Tertiary Education


The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): My visit to Space Studio West London this morning was excellent; a robot even transported my ministerial pack across the room. I was incredibly impressed.

On the immigration White Paper, I should say that the Government are undertaking a period of extensive engagement on the future of our immigration system. It will consider the views of business, academic institutions and employers. That will ensure that the future immigration system works for the whole UK, including students in tertiary education.

Martyn Day: EU nationals are an integral part of academic institutions in Scotland, accounting for 20% of total staff and playing a crucial role in the research and teaching capacities of our colleges and universities. The £30,000 salary threshold is a critical threat to that. Does the Secretary of State personally support that policy, or will he finally support scrapping it?

Chris Skidmore: As the Minister responsible in a different Department for science, research and innovation, I recognise the challenges presented by the £30,000 cap recommended by the Migration Advisory Committee. I understand that there is a period of consultation on this cap at the moment. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to
make his representations known to the Home Office. I have also been working with the high-level group on exiting the European Union on this issue.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The SQA—Scottish Qualifications Authority—exams started in Scotland last week and today pupils are sitting exams in German, politics, biology and Gaelic. I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing them the very best of success. Gur math a thèid leibh!

The inclusion of international students in net migration figures continues to cause deep concerns across higher education, and it now seems that EU nationals will be subject to the same harsh regime. Can the Minister confirm that from 2021 EU nationals will pay annual fees of up to £25,000 to attend university in England?

Chris Skidmore: There will be an urgent question on this issue later, but it is important to reflect on the fact that the Government have already committed for the 2019-20 academic year that there will be home fee status for EU students for the 2020-21 academic year. We will be making an announcement on that very shortly. It is also important to recognise that the number of EU students has risen by 3.8% since 2017. The Government want to ensure we do our best to attract the best and the brightest internationally, which is why we recently published our international education strategy. I want to ensure we do not just attract global talent from the EU. The key point here is to ensure we do not discriminate against EU students versus international students, but that we have a system that works for all students across the globe.

Carol Monaghan: The UK’s hostile immigration environment seems to know no bounds. EU nationals will now experience the same harsh conditions as other international students. It seems that the Government are happy to ignore advice from universities, business and civic society in their attempt to curb international student numbers. What impact assessment has been made of potentially losing high-calibre EU students who may well decide to study in a more welcoming country?

Chris Skidmore: On the urgent question, I will not comment on specific leaks when it comes to matters of finance. I am always happy to meet the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), to reverse the policies that have led to that decline. Will he agree to meet us, so that together we can persuade his Government colleagues of the need to back those changes?

Chris Skidmore: I am always happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. I am sure he remembers that when I was a Cabinet Office I happily worked with him on an amendment he tabled to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 regarding student registration. However, since 2017, the figures show a rise in EU and non-EU students. He mentions market share. He is absolutely right that we want to do more and that we need to do more. That is why we published our international education strategy, which has the ambition not just of raising the complete value of international education from £30 billion to £35 billion by 2030, but of putting in the figure of 600,000 students. It is not just about having a system that works around visas, but the whole student experience and ensuring the UK is the best place to study globally.

Leaving the EU: Tertiary Education

6. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on tertiary education of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement.

8. John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on tertiary education of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government remain focused on securing a deal that will ensure an orderly exit from the EU. We are considering all aspects of how exiting the EU might affect education, including the delivery of the Government guarantee, attracting international students and staff, and access to student finance.

Dr Whitford: In contrast to Scotland, the Secretary of State proposes to remove home fee status from EU students after Brexit. This has created such concern that the Norwegian higher education Minister is advising students to avoid the UK. Is the Secretary of State proud that his plans are causing European students to avoid our universities?

Chris Skidmore: I recently met the Norwegian Minister the hon. Lady mentions, Iselin Nyboe, to reassure her of the UK Government’s commitment to student programmes such as Erasmus and scientific programmes such as Horizon 2020. What I am not happy with is Members talking down our higher education system when the Government want to ensure that we bring more students here. We are looking at how to do that as part of our education strategy.

John McNally: In the event of a no-deal Brexit, the Government have proposed a temporary leave that will apply to EU citizens for 36 months, allowing EU students to complete their third-level degrees here in England. However, the majority of Scottish degree courses last for 48 months, and thus EU students will face the threat of being forced to leave before finishing their education.
Will the Minister advise on what steps he has taken to address and right this policy, which will harm Scottish universities?

Chris Skidmore: I recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman makes and the potential impact on Scottish universities, as does the Home Secretary, whose officials have been working closely with mine on this. The Government are now considering how best to ensure that students on four-year courses are easily able to move into the student system once their European temporary leave to remain expires. If European economic area or Swiss citizens wish to stay in the UK for longer than 36 months, they will need to apply and qualify for an immigration status under the main study routes of the UK’s new skills-based immigration system. Alternatively, they will be able to apply, under tier 4 of the points-based system, for a student visa to cover the full length of their course.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Our higher education institutions—including the Open University, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this month—are world class, but sadly, despite what the Minister says, the Government are letting those universities down. They are not giving clarity at the moment over access to research grant collaboration with EU partners.

Now there are reports that the Government are preparing to charge EU students—[Interruption]—Stop chuntering!—who currently pay UK fees, a hugely increased international rate, and to scrap their support when we leave the EU, with or without a deal. The Minister is wrong: statistics from the Russell Group show that EU student numbers are 3% down, and EU postgraduate numbers are 9% down for 2018-19. The Education Secretary is said to be pushing this forward. Does the universities Minister agree with it, and is it Government policy?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman talks about uncertainty, but it is uncertainty that he himself has created, as one of the Members who has not voted for a deal, which would have provided certainty on student mobility and student finance. The deal, if passed, will allow us to begin work on a future relationship that ensures that we can work together, with our universities sector and with our European partners. Although we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving our European neighbours behind. We want to continue those close partnerships, which is why I have been in Brussels attending the European Competitiveness Council—I hope to do so again on 28 May—to ensure that we can associate into Horizon Europe. I want to continue to work on the possibilities for student exchanges. It is important that we maintain our university system not just as a European one but as an international one as well.

Mr Speaker: Brevity personified—Sir Nicholas Soames.

Language Teaching

7. Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase language teaching in schools.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It was Labour’s decision in 2004 to make languages at key stage 4 non-compulsory that led to the dramatic drop in the numbers taking GCSE foreign languages. Thanks to the introduction of the EBacc, the percentage of pupils in state-funded schools taking a language GCSE has increased, from 40% in 2010 to 46% now. Our target is 75% studying a foreign language GCSE by 2022 and 90% by 2025.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Given that catastrophic mistake by the Labour party, I commend my right hon. Friend and his colleagues for the proportion of pupils taking a language GCSE increasing from 40% to 47% since 2010. Does he agree that, given the—so far, unicorn—desire to develop a really global Britain project, it will become more and more important that our students are properly equipped for a fully global world, in which Britain will have to make a new way for itself?

Nick Gibb: I agree with my right hon. Friend completely. As we enter a new global economy, we want to be able to trade with our European partners and need to speak European languages, as well as languages throughout the world, which is why we believe in the EBacc. I wish the Labour party would support our ambition to have 75% of students taking the EBacc combination of GCSEs by 2022.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The provision of languages post-16 has shrunk since 2010. This is largely due—or partly due at least—to the continually growing 16-to-18 funding gap on the Government’s watch. Is it not time to raise the rates so that, among other things, languages can prosper again post-16?

Nick Gibb: Actually, that is not the reason. The numbers taking A-level maths and further maths are at all-time highs. Languages have suffered because of the decision in 2004 on GCSEs. It is difficult for someone to take an A-level in a language if they have not studied it at GCSE.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Speaking a language greatly increases one’s employability. According to Business Insider, the No. 1 language for getting a good job is German—going by the number of job ads and the quality and pay of the jobs—but only 3,000 pupils sat German A-level last year. The exam could be held in various places. It is not time to raise the rates so that, among other things, languages can prosper again post-16?

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Germany is the fourth largest economy and not far away—a few hundred miles—from this country, and we need more young people studying German GCSE, which is why we have the target of having 75% taking a modern language by 2022.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): To teach more foreign languages in schools we need to recruit and retain the very best teachers. What is the Minister doing to help us retain the very best modern languages teachers, who are feeling the pressure under increased workloads and increased stress?
Nick Gibb: That is why we have introduced a recruitment and retention strategy and why we have £26,000 tax-free bursaries and £28,000 tax-free scholarships for the best foreign language graduates coming into teaching. Teaching is a very worthwhile profession. I hope the hon. Gentleman will talk it up, as we do on the Conservative Benches.

School Places: Essex

9. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the adequate provision of school places in Essex and other areas of high growth.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): One of the first decisions the Government took on coming to office in 2010 was to double the capital expenditure on creating new school places, after the previous Labour Government cut 100,000 school places. Since 2010, some 921,000 new school places have been created, including 450 new free schools. More than £12 billion has been committed since 2011 to delivering those new schools and new school places.

Vicky Ford: My constituency is growing very fast and we need more school places. We have a new all-through school opening, but many of the other schools are expanding their places and then struggling because the funding comes with a lag. Come the spending review, will my right hon. Friend and the Education team support a campaign for fairer funding for schools in areas of very high growth?

Nick Gibb: The national funding formula allocates £287 million nationally in growth funding and local authorities also have the ability to top-slice their wider schools block funding if necessary to supplement growth funding. In 2018-19, Essex has been allocated £6.8 million in growth funding through the national funding formula growth factor, but we will, as my hon. Friend requests, make a strong case at the spending review for the right education funding for all areas.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): From some of the answers from Ministers today, anyone would think they had not been in government for nearly a decade.

School places are really important for parents, but often at this time of the year many of them find it is not they who choose the school their sons and daughters will go to but the school that chooses which pupils to accept. Can I remind Ministers of the pledges they made before the last general election? Parents in Essex and across the country were promised a review of school admissions in the Conservative party manifesto. Will the Minister keep to that promise?

Nick Gibb: What I will tell the hon. Lady is that last year—which is the latest for which we have figures—97.7% of families achieved one of their top three primary school choices, 91% achieved their first choice of primary school, and 93.8% achieved one of their top three choices of secondary school. In 2010, when we came to office, just 66% of pupils attended a good or outstanding school; today the figure is 86%.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): When Aspire alternative provision Academy in Harlow was taken over by the TBAP Multi-Academy Trust in 2017, it had a healthy balance and a strong business plan. Since then, it has been revealed on the BBC’s “Panorama” programme that TBAP had been in serious debt, and its public accounts were found to be inaccurate. Aspire has been dragged down with it. Does the Minister agree that it is absolutely necessary for Ofsted to inspect multi-academy trusts to prevent that situation from occurring again? How will he support Aspire, whose headteacher is here today, and which wants to be brokered to another MAT?

Nick Gibb: As my right hon. Friend will know, we issued a financial notice to improve to the TBAP trust in August 2018, long before the “Panorama” programme was broadcast, because we were concerned about poor financial management and controls. That notice will remain in place until we are satisfied that the trust has taken effective action to address our concerns. We always act swiftly in such circumstances, and our primary concern has been to preserve the education of children and limit the impact on the taxpayer.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): From some of the answers from Ministers today, anyone would think they had not been in government for nearly a decade.

Mr Speaker: I congratulate the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) on running in the marathon yesterday, while also expressing some surprise that he is nevertheless still leaping to his feet with notable alacrity.

Tom Pursglove: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is very kind. All the pain is worth it for two great causes.

Corby is the fastest growing town in the country, and it is essential for school places to keep up with that housing growth. What reassurance can the Minister give parents in my constituency that both the policy and the resources are in place to achieve exactly that?

Nick Gibb: Let me add my congratulations to my hon. Friend on his achievement in the London marathon. He will be pleased to know that in 2019-20 we have introduced a new formulaic approach to the allocation of growth funding to local authorities in the NFF. It is a fairer system, because it is based not just on what the authorities spent in the past but on the actual growth in the number of pupils. We will, of course, always keep this issue under review.

Education Funding: England


The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): While this country is a relatively high spender on state education by comparison with other similar countries,
we recognise that finances remain challenging, and we will continue to listen to professionals in the run-up to the spending review.

**Phil Wilson:** Like many other schools in my constituency, Fishburn Primary School is facing severe funding difficulties, to the extent that parents are holding a fundraising event to raise money for essentials. Given that a real-terms increase in funds is not coming from his Department, would the Secretary of State care to contribute a raffle prize to help to raise the money that will ensure that local children continue to receive the education that they deserve?

**Damian Hinds:** It is, of course, exceptionally important for schools to be properly resourced. In the Darlington local authority area, where the typical primary class size is 27, the average funding is £104,000, while in the Durham local authority area—which the hon. Gentleman mentioned—where the class size is slightly smaller at 25, the funding is a shade higher at £105,000. Of course it is right that, through the national funding formula, we ensure that schools are properly resourced for the education that they will need to deliver.

**Rushanara Ali:** Since 2015 schools in Tower Hamlets have lost out on some £56 million—of which £7.7 million is for children with special needs—despite having the highest child poverty rate in the country. When will the Secretary of State stand up to the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, and seek the additional funding that is so much needed for our children around the country?

**Damian Hinds:** As my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards said earlier, we will of course put forward a strong case for education, on which so much else depends in both our society and our economy. The hon. Lady mentioned her constituency. That is an area of relatively high school funding per pupil, and specifically on high needs. I recognise the additional pressures on the high-needs budget, but £1.4 million of the additional money that we were able to secure for high needs will go to her constituents over two years.

**Grahame Morris:** Of the 33 schools in the Easington constituency, 28 have had their funding cut between 2015 and 2019, three of them by more than £600,000, including my former primary school, now called Ribbon Primary School. Are we to take it that the Government’s plan is to transfer resources from hard-pressed areas in the north-east to more affluent areas in the south and south-east?

**Damian Hinds:** Funding has been allocated on a per-pupil basis for a large number of years now, including through the period 1997 to 2010, so a decrease in pupil numbers has an effect on funding, but through the national funding formula over two years we are allocating at least a 1% increase in respect of every child in the country, and for historically underfunded areas, up to 6%.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Amounts per pupil are being top-sliced to meet a deficit in the high-needs block, so the amount actually going into the school accounts per pupil is not nearly as impressive, is it?

**Damian Hinds:** There is pressure on high-needs budgets. Actually, the high-needs budget has gone up from £5 billion to £6 billion over the last few years, but there are still those pressures, as my right hon. Friend rightly says. That is why it was so important to secure the additional £250 million that we announced at the end of last year.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I obviously welcome the fact that 15,200 children are now in good and outstanding schools in Somerset, as compared to 2010, but—urgently—teachers are coming to me increasingly about the funding pressures they are under, because they have more and more on their shoulders. I have just had seven schools in the Tone Valley Partnership and a raft of schools with the Redstart Trust coming to me to highlight their funding pressures, so please will the Secretary of State meet me again to understand what they are facing and to discuss it?

**Damian Hinds:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the strong performance of schools in her area and the improvement in Ofsted judgments. It is also true, of course, that over the two years Somerset schools have benefited from a 5.9% increase in per-pupil funding, but I will of course be more than happy to meet her again to talk about the high-needs pressures and others that she mentioned.

**Grahame Morris** (Darlington) (Con): It is, of course, exceptionally important that we have the right education and the right educational needs and disabilities budget is overspent by £1.3 million and school cuts have been exacerbated, leaving parents and teachers seriously under-resourced to support their child, psychologically, socially and educationally. I will of course be more than happy to meet her again to understand her concerns.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) is also a successful marathon runner who deserves the approbation of the House.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words. May I take this opportunity to thank everyone across Barnsley for supporting me yesterday?

When the Government announced their new institutes of technology earlier this month, there was not a single one in South Yorkshire or West Yorkshire, and just two across the whole of the north. Will the Secretary of State review that decision and support new applicants from those areas?
Damian Hinds: The creation of institutes of technology is a very exciting development, and there will be more to come. This is a great opportunity to improve the provision of higher technical education throughout the country; as time goes on, I anticipate that there will be more of them.

I join Mr Speaker in congratulating the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) on their great efforts in the marathon.

School Funding: North-East

11. Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for schools in the north-east. [910565]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Funding for schools in the north-east has increased by 2.9% per pupil compared to 2017-18, which is equivalent to an extra £77.4 million in total, when rising pupil numbers are taken into account.

Mr Hepburn: The Government are continually telling us that record levels of funding are going into education, but it is about time we found out where it is going, because the average secondary school in the north-east will be £190,000 a year worse off than it was in 2015.

Damian Hinds: No; as I was saying to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), the national funding formula allocates at least 1% over two years in respect of each pupil, and that goes up to 6% per pupil in historically underfunded areas. In a few exceptional cases, it is even more than that. It is incredibly important that we have the right resourcing in place for children’s education throughout the country, and that is another reason why we will be making a strong case on behalf of education in the spending review.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): On Saturday afternoon, I heard the amazingly talented steel band from Prince Bishops Community Primary School. The Secretary of State has cut the amount per child by £600 in that school. It is in the top 10% of most deprived wards, so can he explain why this has happened?

Damian Hinds: We have not done that. As I was saying a moment ago, we have increased the allocation of funding in respect of each pupil through the national funding formula. Local authorities make the final decision on the allocation of funding between schools, according to issues such as the proportion of children with special educational needs, but I would be happy to sit down with the hon. Lady to look specifically at the numbers that she has talked about in respect of that individual school.

Apprenticeships: Careers Guidance

13. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of (a) careers information and (b) guidance on apprenticeships for young people. [910567]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): All schools and colleges must provide careers information, advice and guidance to 12 to 18-year-olds. Since January 2018, schools have been required, under what is commonly known as the Baker clause, to invite providers of technical education and apprenticeships to talk to pupils, in order to give them the full picture of their options. A third of technical education and apprenticeship providers say that the situation has improved since that requirement came in, but we know that there is more to do.

Mr Sharma: Employers have told me that they work in a constantly evolving environment, and that if we are to avoid falling behind the rest of the world, we need a workforce that is able to cope with digital change. What is the Minister doing to ensure that engineering apprenticeships include training in digital skills, so that no young person is left behind in the modern digital economy?

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that it is increasingly important for young people to have those digital skills. I refer him to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education’s website, where he will be able to see the 400 apprenticeship standards that have been developed, many of which involve digital skills. From 2020, we are introducing the first T-levels, the first of which will be a digital T-level.

School Curriculum

15. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that schools provide a broad curriculum. [910570]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): State-funded schools in England must offer a broad and balanced curriculum, which for maintained schools includes the national curriculum. Subject to the consultation outcome, Ofsted’s new framework will place the curriculum at the heart of inspection, with an emphasis on schools providing a broad, balanced and ambitious curriculum for all pupils, together with an emphasis on the EBacc for secondary schools.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister for that answer. Across the House this afternoon, colleagues have mentioned the importance to a broad-based curriculum of music, drama, sport, public speaking, outdoor pursuits and many other things. I am delighted to hear that Ofsted will need to look at this, but does he agree that it is vital that these activities should be offered by all schools in all areas, not just by the schools in which parents and others can provide contributions to ensure that these activities happen?

Nick Gibb: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. All the areas that he has cited are vital for children in schools. Art and music are compulsory in the national curriculum up to age 14, and the Government have provided almost £500 million between 2016 and 2018 for arts education programmes. As he pointed out, Ofsted’s proposed framework increases the emphasis on schools’ provision of a broad curriculum, and inspectors will also expect to see rich extracurricular activities for pupils.

Mr Speaker: Mr Fysh? Let us hear from you on this—the curriculum, T-levels, etc.
Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeoval) (Con): The breadth of the curriculum is important, particularly when it comes to colleges. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Yeovil College on its successful institute of technology bid, which will enable the delivery of a much broader curriculum? Will he also meet me to discuss course funding? There is some concern about whether the capital funding made available for the initial T-level pilots will be available for subsequent ones, and in the further roll-out.

Nick Gibb: I congratulate Yeovil College on its achievement. I can tell my hon. Friend that £38 million of capital will be made available for T-level development and that an extra £500 million a year will be allocated to that sector of our education system once the courses are up and running.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are under considerable pressure of time, but time must be found to hear the voice of Watford.

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Before anyone asks, I did not run the marathon yesterday; I thought I should give other hon. Members a chance. However, I would like to declare a new—

Mr Speaker: How about saying, “Question No. 16”?

Condition Improvement Fund

16. Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): What is the timescale for the disbursement of allocations from the condition improvement fund. [910571]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate all colleagues who ran the marathon. The disbursements of funding for successful projects under the condition improvement fund 2019-20 will start in June.

Richard Harrington: I must disclose an interest, in that I am now a director of the Watford UTC, and I thank Lord Agnew for all the help he has given that university technical college.

I am delighted that four schools in Watford were successful in their bids to the fund for improvements, which is known as the CIF—I know that that sounds like a disinfectant, but it is actually really important. The successful schools were Watford Grammar School for Boys, the Grove Academy, the Orchard Primary School and Parmiter’s School. This is excellent news, but will my hon. Friend give me an idea of when the schools will receive the money from this welcome funding boost?

Nadhim Zahawi: Academies and sixth-form colleges can apply for funding over two financial years. The funding starts in June, and allocations for new projects will continue up until spring 2021. My hon. Friend has been a champion for children and schools in Watford.
I understand that this is unwelcome news for universities that are having to face increased bills, but in terms of ensuring that universities are financially sustainable, recent reports have shown that the universities sector is in good health. We need to ensure that universities work with the Office for Students, which is clear that when it comes to universities’ registration plans, financial sustainability is key and is marked down for five years. We want to work with universities to make sure they can offer the best experience to students.

Angela Rayner: I am sure those watching will say that the Minister’s response of “unwelcome news” is just not good enough.

One of the most important things in the education sector is the early years provision. Will the Education Secretary confirm that funding for Sure Start has fallen yet again? It is down by another 12% on his watch. Now that the Prime Minister has announced and promised an end to austerity, can the Education Secretary tell us when the cuts will stop for our tots?

Chris Skidmore: This Government are spending £3.5 billion on early years entitlement, and we are absolutely committed to ensuring that pupils get the best start in life as early as possible. The hon. Lady hits on the crux of the issue: to ensure that we have an education system that is sustainable and works for everyone, we need to make sure that all parts of the Department for Education are properly financed.

The hon. Lady’s commitment on the teachers’ pension scheme has to compete with other commitments within the education system. We will have an urgent question later about EU student finance, and I see in the papers that she has stated she would give free tuition fees to EU students. The point here is that money for EU students comes out of the pockets of Sure Start. The issue she has to address is where the money is coming from in the Department for Education for all her unfunded announcements. It is simply not acceptable for her to stand at the Dispatch Box and make commitments that will only disappoint people in the long term.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Green; get in there, man.

T5. [910584] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) also put in a very creditable performance.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I agree with my hon. Friend that in many instances, it may be better to build a new primary school than to expand an existing school, and a variety of factors will need to be weighed up in making such decisions: the quality of existing provision; the impact on existing schools and the community; and the overall costs and value for money.

T2. [910581] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Tony Davies, the headteacher of St Matthew’s Primary School in Cambridge, recently told a national newspaper of his fury when he learned of a £60,000 budget cut to his school next year. The school is much loved by pupils and parents, but it will now have to cut its core education services. Does the Minister share Mr Davies’s fury?

Nick Gibb: As we have said a number of times during this Question Time, under the national funding formula, every local authority is being funded with more money for every pupil in every school—a minimum of 1% more, and up to 6% more for schools that have been historically underfunded.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): If a school receives a pupil after the census cut-off date, it does not receive the per-pupil funding for the rest of that financial year. This is costing schools in my Lewes constituency around £4,000 per pupil. What is the Minister going to do to look again at the issue of the census cut-off date?

Nick Gibb: Lagged funding, of course, has an advantage in providing stability for the school system. Particularly where pupil numbers fall, for example, a school will know that it will not see an immediate drop in its funding. We keep the growth factor funding issue under review for those schools that are experiencing exceptionally high increases in pupil numbers, and we also keep this factor of the national funding formula under review.

T6. [910585] Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Can the Minister tell the House when the Augar review of post-18 education and student funding is likely to report? I hope he does not just say, “Soon.” Will he outline the steps the Department is taking to ensure that Augar’s proposals do not adversely affect or reduce university funding, or create a more uncertain financial environment for universities?

Damian Hinds: I would like to take this opportunity to thank Philip Augar and his team for the very thorough piece of work they are doing, looking at post-18 education and its financing. Of course, that covers both the university route and others. It is an incredibly important piece of work. I do not have a date to give the hon. Lady today; I will avoid using the “s” word, but we will come back on this before too long. While I am on my feet, let me say that we have mentioned everybody else who ran the marathon and who has stood up today, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) also put in a very creditable performance.

Mr Speaker: I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green); I was not aware of that, but I am now, and I thank him for what he has done.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Although I welcome the focus on phonics, recent research suggests that that method of teaching is less effective for children who have a specific learning disability, such as dyslexia. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that resources will be allocated to provide teachers with the specialist training needed to support those pupils who find it hard to learn using phonics? Will he ensure that this research is taken into account when assessing the literacy levels of dyslexic children?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right; quality teaching with a differentiated approach ensures that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, including dyslexia, develop key skills, such as spelling. We are funding the
Whole School SEND Consortium, in order to bring together practitioners and networks, so that they can build a community of practice, identify school SEND improvements, and exchange knowledge and expertise.

T7. [910586] Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): A recent survey I sent to schools in my constituency found that 82% have had their budget cut in real terms for the current academic year, and 88% were pessimistic about their funding over the next three years. Will the Minister meet me and headteachers from my constituency to discuss these findings in more detail, including the implications of the Government’s cuts for our children and young people?

Nick Gibb: The national funding formula came into effect in 2018-19, the last financial year, and it is in effect in this financial year, 2019-20. We are maintaining per-pupil spending in real terms in both those financial years. As I have said, since 2017 we have been allocating to local authorities more money for every pupil in every school.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, Mr Wragg. You were a teacher. I think we should hear from you.

Mr Wragg: It was an undistinguished career, Mr Speaker. May I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for visiting Romiley Primary School in my constituency with me on Friday, for very constructive discussions with the headteacher and governors? I urge him to have similarly constructive discussions with our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on similar matters such as the apprenticeship levy, per-pupil funding and the high-needs budget.

Damian Hinds: I very much enjoyed and got a lot from my visit to Romiley on Friday; I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Discussions with headteachers and governing bodies are so important in learning about specific pressures on schools, and in helping us to develop our response to them.

T9. [910588] Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Last Friday, a very special man, Ian Dickson, and his dedicated team of volunteers made possible the Care Experienced Conference, which was led by and involved care experienced people. I had the honour of being there; it was emotive, powerful and uplifting. The current care system was rightly characterised as being utterly broken care system?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I know the hon. Lady is passionate about the care system, having been a social worker. We are introducing reforms—both workforce reforms with the national assessment and accreditation system, and through the investment we are making in “Strengthening Families, Protecting Children”, for which £84 million was announced at the Budget. Of course, we will also put our best foot forward, working with the sector, to make sure that the financial challenges are highlighted at the spending review.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I put an eccentric point of view to the Secretary of State? If we make a manifesto commitment, we should keep it. Two years after breaking our manifesto commitment to set up Catholic free schools, we were promised new, voluntary-aided Catholic schools. I am told by the Catholic Education Service that not a single one has yet opened, anywhere in the country. If it is a pipeline, it is a very long one. What is he doing about it?

Damian Hinds: Schools do take a while to build. My right hon. Friend is right that I made a commitment, including a personal commitment to him and others, that we would make sure that faith schools, including Catholic schools, would be able to open in areas where there was the demographic need and the demand for them. That commitment absolutely remains in place.

T10. [910589] Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On Friday, I met people from two schools in my Bristol South constituency, and funding and the impact on children were the key concerns expressed. When the Secretary of State’s Department reviews the work of his school resource management advisers, will that include a direct assessment of the impact of any recommended savings on pupil outcomes?

Damian Hinds: Yes. Our resource management advice programme is all about helping to support schools in what they do best. We expect the headteacher and the chair of governors of a small primary school to be expert at a remarkably wide array of things. It is absolutely right to offer support to schools, including on things such as financial management, but that is there to support the work that schools do in education.

Suella Braverman ( Fareham) (Con): I recently met David Prince and his 12-year-old daughter Holly, who is visually impaired. Holly benefits hugely from the specialist teacher advisory service provided by Hampshire County Council, but the council proposes cutting the funding for this life-changing service, which helped Holly to learn to use a cane, and trained her in mobility. Will a Minister work with me to help Holly, her father and Hampshire County Council find resources so that vulnerable children in Fareham do not have to go without a rich education?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will happily look into that case and take it offline.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): When the Timpson review finally passes the editing process at the Department for Education, will it include an analysis of whether a lack of funding for pastoral and family-support staff is driving exclusions?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady will have too long to wait for Edward’s report and our response to it. When it comes, she will find that it is a comprehensive and thorough piece of work. We have been looking carefully at all the relevant aspects to make sure that we can guarantee that, as was said earlier, when somebody
is excluded, it is not only the end of something, but the start of something positive and new. We support schools being able to make such decisions, which remain an important part of behaviour management in schools.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the support that he and his Department have given to Fowey River Academy, which is re-brokering out of the discredited Adventure Learning Academy Trust into the Leading Edge Academies Partnership this Wednesday. The re-brokering process has been complex, so will the Secretary of State look into it to see how we can minimise the disruption and uncertainty for all those involved?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right that we have to get the process right. We continue to keep the process under review. I would be happy for either me or my noble Friend Lord Agnew to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that case.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Recent figures show that areas with the greatest need have seen the biggest decline in the number of apprenticeship starts in the past year, with new starts in Bradford South falling by around 50%. I thank the Minister for visiting my constituency, but I am extremely concerned that the current apprenticeship scheme may be widening rather than narrowing the gap between different parts of the country. Will the Minister outline her plans to remedy the situation?

Anne Milton: It was a pleasure to visit the hon. Lady’s constituency, where we saw examples of real excellence in the provision of apprenticeships. We have two specific projects, including the 5 Cities project, which is increasing diversity, and we are working in four separate areas to see whether we can make sure that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can access high-quality apprenticeships, because they often lack the social capital that others from less disadvantaged backgrounds have.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Jenn Willmitt and her team at Willenhall E-Act Academy, which has been moved out of special measures following a recent Ofsted inspection?

Damian Hinds: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Mrs Willmitt on that achievement.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The rationing of special needs funding means that Derbyshire County Council is asking schools not to apply for support until pupils are at least two years behind in educational terms, meaning that they often never get the support that they need. Will the Secretary of State look with me at how county councils are implementing this rationing, to ensure that pupils get the support that they need when they need it?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have launched ambitious SEND reforms, which I have spoken about at the Dispatch Box before, but I will happily meet the hon. Lady to look at the specific issue she mentions.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will Ministers join me in congratulating Queen Emma’s Primary School in Witney on its recent Ofsted success, and will they join me in noting that it is the school’s use of phonics combined with a broad, attractive curriculum that is providing an outstanding education for the children of Witney at primary, secondary and beyond?

Nick Gibb: I was determined that no one else would answer this question, Mr Speaker. I send my congratulations to Queen Emma’s Primary School on a wonderful set of results in its Ofsted inspection. Phonics is the most effective way of teaching young children to read, and 82% are now reaching the expected standard. There is a direct link between reaching the expected standard in a phonics check and reaching the expected standard in the key stage 2 reading test: 88% of those who reach the expected standard in a phonics check go on to reach the expected standard in reading at key stage 2.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Minister previously spoke warmly of his desire to maintain good relations with Europe after Brexit. Is he aware of the very recent comments by Guy Verhofstadt, the EU Parliament’s Brexit negotiator, that students should not be “victims of Brexit”, and that he intends to write to the Prime Minister to say that the EU will never accept the Government’s hike in tuition fees for EU students? How does the Minister think that the PM will answer?

Chris Skidmore: We are about to have an urgent question on this specific issue, but I would say that this is part of negotiations on our future partnership with the EU, which we could be having now if people like the hon. Lady had voted for the deal and allowed us to get on with it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will Ministers join me in congratulating Queen Emma’s Primary School in Witney on its recent Ofsted success, and will they join me in noting that it is the school’s use of phonics combined with a broad, attractive curriculum that is providing an outstanding education for the children of Witney at primary, secondary and beyond?

Nick Gibb: Thank you, Mr Speaker; that is very generous. As it is highly topical, may I ask how my right hon. Friend is getting on with encouraging schools to roll out the Daily Mile initiative, particularly given that I have visited the Hazel Leys Academy in Corby to open the new running track? The school is embracing the initiative, and that is great—fantastic. Will the Minister congratulate it?

Nadhim Zahawi: It is a pleasure to congratulate the school and highlight how important the Daily Mile is, as well as the work we are doing with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that as many schools as possible deliver the Daily Mile.
Tuition Fees: EU Students

3.42 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on Government policy regarding tuition fees for EU students after the UK has left the European Union.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government have repeatedly made it clear that we absolutely value international exchange and collaboration in education and training as part of our vision for a global Britain. We believe that the UK and European countries should continue to give young people and students the chance to benefit from each other’s world-leading universities post exit.

Over the weekend, the media reported on a leaked Cabinet document discussing Government policy on EU student access to finance products for the 2020-21 academic year and beyond. At this time, I want to tell the House that no decision has yet been made on the continued access to student finance for EU students. Discussions at Cabinet level are ongoing and should remain confidential. I will make no comment on this apparent leak, which is deeply regrettable.

Students from the EU make a vital contribution to the university sector. It is testament to the quality and reputation of our higher education system that so many students from abroad choose to come and study here. As I stated earlier, since 2017 EU student numbers are up 3.8% and non-EU student numbers are up by 4.9%.

In July 2018, we announced that students from the European Union starting courses in England in the 2019-20 academic year will continue to be eligible for home fees status, which means that they will be charged the same tuition fees as UK students and have access to tuition fee loans for the duration of their studies. Applications for students studying in academic year 2020-21 open in September 2019 and the Government will provide sufficient notice for prospective EU students and the wider higher education sector on fee arrangements ahead of the 2020-21 academic year and the subsequent years, which, as I have just stated, will obviously reflect our future relationship with European Union and the negotiations on that going forward.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. We have all read in the leaked reports that the Secretary of State plans to withdraw the home fee status for EU nationals from 2020 onwards. The Minister cannot confirm the Government’s policy today, so when will universities get the certainty they need to plan for their future? Has his Department carried out any assessment of how many EU students would no longer study here as a result of this change?

At a time when the finances of universities are a matter of increasing concern, what impact will these changes have on the sustainability of our institutions? How can they publish this strategy one month, and then pursue a strategy that will undermine it the next? Does he still expect that 600,000 international students will come to the UK every year by 2030 if this rise in tuition fees is introduced?

Time and again, this Government have undermined our universities through their shambolic handling of Brexit. The future of Erasmus and Horizon 2020 are already in doubt, and now the very opportunities that we offer to young people from across the EU are being taken away. It is not in our interest to build walls between our world-class universities and our nearest neighbours, yet this Government are committed to doing exactly that.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this urgent question. It is important that we all recognise that EU students and staff make a vital contribution to our universities. It is also important that those people understand that the Government are determined to ensure that, even though we are leaving the European Union, we are not losing our academic research partnerships behind. When I sit in the Department for Education as Minister for Universities, I also—

Angela Rayner: I say—if she would not interrupt me—the economic importance of our higher education sector is reflected in the need to attract EU students and students from across the globe. That is the crux of the matter. We want to ensure that our nation is attractive internationally.

We have given commitments and guarantees regarding all successful Erasmus participations and regarding the Horizon 2020 science programmes, from which so many of our universities benefit. We made it a priority very early on after the referendum that we would set out the post-EU exit Government guarantee and the Government guarantee extension—that is, that we would fund the lifetime of these projects before Brexit if these applications were successful, and even post Brexit to December 2020.

We are drawing up our immigration system for January 2021 onwards. As the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) says—if she would not interrupt me—the economic importance of our higher education sector is reflected in the need to attract EU students and students from across the globe. That is the crux of the matter. We want to ensure that our nation is attractive internationally.

We have given commitments and guarantees regarding all successful Erasmus participations and regarding the Horizon 2020 science programmes, from which so many of our universities benefit. We made it a priority very early on after the referendum that we would set out the post-EU exit Government guarantee and the Government guarantee extension—that is, that we would fund the lifetime of these projects before Brexit if these applications were successful, and even post Brexit to December 2020.

We are drawing up our immigration system for January 2021 onwards. As the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) says—if she would not interrupt me—the economic importance of our higher education sector is reflected in the need to attract EU students and students from across the globe. That is the crux of the matter. We want to ensure that our nation is attractive internationally.

We have given commitments and guarantees regarding all successful Erasmus participations and regarding the Horizon 2020 science programmes, from which so many of our universities benefit. We made it a priority very early on after the referendum that we would set out the post-EU exit Government guarantee and the Government guarantee extension—that is, that we would fund the lifetime of these projects before Brexit if these applications were successful, and even post Brexit to December 2020.
partners. That simply is not the case. With regard to our negotiations, I have spoken to about 15 European higher education Ministers. We need to make sure that we commit to them that Britain remains an attractive place for students from all nations across the world to come for work and to study. That is why we have established our international education strategy, why we have made the commitment on the guarantee, and why, rightly, we continue to work on our negotiations with the EU. If we had signed and passed a deal in this House, we would have had the certainty going forward to December 2020. Labour Members, with their Janus-faced—two-faced—approach, cast aspersions about the levels of uncertainty with regard to EU student funding when we would have guaranteed that funding for the next two years but they decided to vote against it. We need to work with universities globally to make sure that we raise our attainment. Our universities are world-class, with four in the world top 10 and 18 in the top 100. We want to support our universities. That is why we have published the international education strategy and why we want to work with them going forward.

Labour already offers students supposedly free tuition fees. Of course, there is no such thing as free tuition fees—they are paid for by the taxpayer, and this would cost the taxpayer an additional £12.5 billion. Labour’s additional policy, now, of saying that it would fund all EU students coming here to be able to study free of charge without having to pay back their tuition fees would cost at least £445 million a year. We have talked about magic money trees in the past—when it comes to Labour, it seems that we are talking about a magic money forest. We need to make sure that we have a fiscally responsible Government who look after our universities. That also means ensuring that we do not deceive our universities by claiming that we can spend money that we do not have.

It is not right that we should discriminate against our other international students. Does the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne believe that we should offer a student finance package for European students once we have left the EU—a system that we have belonged to as members of the EU? Once we are no longer members of the EU, is it right that we then discriminate against Indian students or Chinese students? What does she say to them? How would she address the fact that her policy would discriminate against most of the students across the globe, at the same time as not having the money to be able to fund these student places?

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are going to spend limited hard-pressed taxpayers’ funds, it would be better to spend them on the poorest countries in this world—the developing nations—and not on some of the richest, most well-to-do countries in the world?

Chris Skidmore: It is important to reflect on our obligations with regard to international policy in terms of both higher education and our sustainable development goals agreed by the United Nations. That is why, in science and research, we have looked at things like the global challenges research fund, which focuses specifically on developing nations, and the Newton fund, worth £735 million, which also focuses on those developing nations. We want to ensure that we can be developing student partnerships and exchanges with all countries. I recently met the organisers of the Fulbright scholarships. Last December, we increased the amount going into those scholarships by about £400,000. We have also set up the Generation UK programme for China.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is interesting to hear the Minister talk about these UK taxpayer-funded schemes, because we know that many of the people involved in them are not able to get visas to come and collaborate with their colleagues here in the UK, so the system is already failing.

The SNP recognises that our EU students are a national asset. As such, the Scottish Government have confirmed that EU students starting courses in Scotland in 2020 will continue to receive free tuition, because these young people across the EU are already planning where they are going to be studying in 2020. Can the Minister confirm when the fee status of EU nationals starting courses in England in 2020 will be announced? They must know this very soon, or we will lose them anyway. The European temporary leave to remain scheme will not suit many courses, as was mentioned in Education questions. Will he therefore work with the Home Office to ensure that his scheme matches a course rather than matches an idea that suits a very small number of students?

Contrary to the assertions of the Universities Minister earlier, the Higher Education Statistics Agency reports that after years of growth in EU student numbers, enrolments of EU students dropped for the first time last year. He must recognise that. We are already making the UK a less attractive place to study, and that is economically damaging. Although he is right to recognise the importance of international students, having EU students enables richer participation in schemes such as Horizon 2020. The Government have expressed enthusiasm to participate in the successor programme. How does he envisage that happening when our credibility in Europe has been undermined? Finally, the post-study work scheme has been economically and culturally beneficial to Scotland. When will the scheme be reintroduced for international students from the EU and further afield?

Chris Skidmore: I will touch on several points that the hon. Lady made. During oral questions we heard concerns raised about the right to remain. I regularly meet Scottish Minister Richard Lochhead, and I will reflect upon representations he has made to me and work with the Home Office. The immigration White Paper will look at all issues relating to visas or post-study work schemes. It is important that that consultation takes place, and I urge Members to participate in it.

At the moment, we are keen to look at association to the successor scheme to Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe. That will begin later this year. The key point is that postgraduate tuition fees are separate from undergraduate tuition fees, and we do not want to do anything that will damage the potential of UK universities to research and continue with their research partnerships.

[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) seems keen to keep on chuntering from a sedentary position. He is welcome to make a contribution in a moment, but I am trying to answer the points made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan).
I welcome the hon. Lady mentioning that this is taxpayers’ money and that subsidy is involved. It is right that we consider how that subsidy is spent effectively. I urge caution that we do not simply send out a message that EU students happen to be unique. We want students from all parts of the globe—Chinese students, Indian students and students from the ASEAN countries—to be involved and raise their opportunity, and to send out a crucial message that when it comes to soft power, the UK will remain a global leader in higher education.

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his explanation; I know he thinks deeply about these issues. Does he agree that if we want our university sector to continue to be world-leading, our action must match our ambition? While no decision has been made on this policy, the cumulative impact of some of our policy decisions—which it is the proposed immigration cap, which would make it more difficult for researchers from abroad to work and study here, or this policy, which would hike up fees for EU students, or the lack of clarity on Erasmus—could be that we undermine the university sector and make it more difficult for young people from this country to live, study and work abroad, and this Government could be portrayed as one who are against young people.

Chris Skidmore: I thank my predecessor for his remarks. The work that he did so soon after we voted to leave the European Union, making the Government guarantee in July 2018 and extending student finance for home fees last year, has set us in a position that is welcome among our European partners. I would also like to put on record my thanks for the work he did in establishing the high-level group on EU exit, which meets monthly. It gives the opportunity for university professionals, including the Russell Group, the University Alliance and MillionPlus, to meet and discuss issues of concern and to ensure that those are fed in internally and that we listen to those points—and we are listening.

We are listening when it comes to the consultation on the immigration White Paper. We are listening when it comes to ensuring that we have a sustainable future with our relationship with the European Union. We are listening when it comes to working on our plans for future association with and participation in the International Science Council, including on making guarantees about Horizon 2020 and looking at association on Horizon Europe. It is right that the Government do this, in tandem with working across all Departments with a cross-Government approach to looking at how we exit the European Union, and I will continue to make sure that I play my role as Universities Minister in backing our universities.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The political declaration agreed between the EU and the UK talks about establishing “general principles, terms and conditions for the United Kingdom’s participation in Union programmes...in areas such as science and innovation, youth, culture and education”.

Do I take it from the reply the Minister has given this afternoon that the question of tuition fees—fees charged to EU students studying here in the UK and to UK students studying elsewhere in the EU—does not come within the terms of that wording, and that if that is the case, there is no bar to the Government choosing to increase those fees before any negotiations on the future partnership with the EU have even begun?

Chris Skidmore: I think the right hon. Gentleman is pointing to paragraph 61—is it?—of the political declaration on the future partnership with the EU. I wish he would support the political declaration, alongside voting for the deal, because we could then get on with discussing those issues with our European partners.

When it comes to Horizon and Erasmus, part of the reason why we find ourselves in difficulties is the uncertainty that there is without knowing whether we are in a deal or a no-deal situation. For all the Opposition Members talking about instability and the lack of certainty, it is on their backs that this is taking place. Those voting against the deal have prevented us from moving on to phase 2 of the negotiations.

We have made commitments on 2019-20 student finance, and we will shortly be making an announcement for 2020-21, ready for applications opening in September 2019. Obviously, any future financial obligations will be part of the spending review, and it is right that they are looked at by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, generally speaking, the rule the Government should adopt, given the unfortunate decision that this country has taken to leave the European Union and in order to make our way in the world to the greatest advantage, is that we must retain a very open system to allow the brightest and the best to come and study here from all over the world at equal rates of charging, but also with a regime that allows them to stay here and work in an orderly, sensible manner that is easily enforced?

Chris Skidmore: From the international perspective of the United Kingdom’s universities, I entirely agree that we now have the highest ever number of applications from foreign countries—about 158,000.1 Looking at this in the round, it is important to reflect on the fact that people want to come to the United Kingdom, and we have an obligation to ensure that we make that possible. However, I suggest that we will support our universities and ensure, as we develop our partnership with the European Union, that we do not exclude those from other foreign countries. That is why we will shortly be publishing our international research and innovation strategy, in addition to the international education strategy. It will ensure that we have a cross-Government approach not just to finance but to the welfare of students, so that when it comes to mental health, accommodation and the full range of student experience, we align in a way that ensures international students feel welcome in this country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I tell the Minister that this was a deeply disappointing statement? He may not have been chuntering, but he was certainly not sending out a clear message. I do not know of a university leader, or university town or city, that is persuaded by the kind of stuff he is saying about the role of universities in the coming years. The fact of the matter is that there has always been the possibility of being a citizen of Europe for someone who is wealthy, like many of the people on his Back Benches, but not for an ordinary member of this society. Our students

have been able to be European citizens—that is what they value—but now they have been cheated of that. This will not be about pounds, shillings and pence, but about robbing young people of the heritage of being real European citizens.

**Chris Skidmore:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Further to a previous intervention of his, I am looking forward to coming up to Huddersfield on 10 May. That demonstrates that I do take action when he asks about my commitment to universities. I am looking forward to meeting the vice-chancellor and other university representatives there, and I am sure that they will discuss these issues with me.

When it comes to opportunities for UK students, it is worth noting that, yes, 16,000 UK students benefit from a European education—that is obviously part of the current system through the EU structures—but that contrasts with a total of 34,000 UK students who are educated internationally, in both EU and non-EU countries. We want to be able to grow that number as well. There is, however, a disproportionate impact on the number of UK students studying in the EU compared with the number of EU students studying in the UK. We would obviously wish to rebalance that and ensure that UK students have the opportunity to study abroad, both in the EU and outside it.

**Mr Speaker:** I do not know whether the Minister has been to the University of Huddersfield before.

**Chris Skidmore** indicated dissent.

**Mr Speaker:** Not yet. Well, I myself gave a lecture there on 24 June 2016, and it is a very fine establishment indeed. I hope that the Minister enjoys his visit there as much as I enjoyed mine.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Last November, the EU27 and the UK agreed to the 147-point document about the future framework. Point 11, right at the top, sets out the ongoing commitment to co-operation in science, innovation, youth, culture and education. It calls for “fair and appropriate financial contribution” and “fair treatment of participants”. Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to help support our ongoing co-operation on science and students is to vote for the withdrawal agreement and firm up the details of our ongoing co-operation, as already agreed between the UK and the EU27?

**Chris Skidmore:** Absolutely. As a Minister, I am keen to move to the next stages of the negotiations around our future partnerships—in fact I am desperate to do so. I encourage Members who voted against the deal to recognise that it is a great deal when it comes to continuing our education and science partnerships.

I attended the EU Competitiveness Council on 18 February, and I talked to EU Ministers. They recognise the world-leading position of UK universities and that the UK does disproportionately well out of scientific grants. We put £4 billion into Horizon 2020, but we get £5.7 billion back. Why would we not want to continue to participate in that?

We are moving on to Horizon Europe as the next process of the scientific partnerships. I will attend the EU Competitiveness Council on 28 May as Science Minister. I will discuss with colleagues on the margins issues such as Erasmus education partnerships and exchanges, which the deal would also have protected. I urge all hon. Members to give me the opportunity to go to Brussels and get on with the next stage of the negotiations.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If UK universities have to increase their fees for EU students and the EU universities reciprocate, will that not mean that only the richest UK students will be able to study abroad? What specifically does the Minister intend to do about that?

**Chris Skidmore:** I go back to the statement. All these issues around reciprocal arrangements and partnerships are matters for future negotiations. I am keen to make sure that we can get on to that page. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will now vote for the deal, to make sure that we can do so.

**Suella Braverman** (Fareham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, post Brexit, we want to continue to attract bright students from many countries all over the world? The proposal that we should exempt EU students from paying fees yet impose them on those from other countries is inherently unfair and, in fact, discriminatory. It does not make economic sense or reflect the open Britain that we are striving to create.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): She’s not voting for your deal either.

**Chris Skidmore:** I urge my hon. Friend to do so as well. I will not discriminate on either side of the House. It is a great deal, which will provide us with certainty. We have been closely involved with our European partners for many decades. Ensuring that we continue some of those partnerships, which have both social and economic value, is important.

My hon. Friend is right about the international perspective. People voted to leave the European Union to ensure that Britain can be outward-looking, positive, not insular and not nativist. We want to be able to reach out to other countries and meet our responsibilities on the sustainable development goals. We want students from India and ASEAN—Association of Southeast Asian Nations—countries who want to come to the UK to study, but cannot at the present time, to have the opportunity to do so. Why should European students be given a disproportionate opportunity when it comes to fee levels? She has a valid point.

**Wes Streeting:** UK higher education is one of our great national and international success stories, yet there can be no doubt that the Prime Minister’s immigration policies have done enormous damage to our international reputation. And here we are again—the cat is out of the bag—looking to charge EU students tuition fees and make as much money out of them as possible before the withdrawal agreement has even been signed. Will that not just use EU students as cash cows, but rob UK students of the opportunity to study abroad? How many more national success stories are we prepared to sacrifice on the altar of Brexit?
Chris Skidmore: When it comes to national success stories, I want to ensure that our international education strategy provides opportunities for UK students to go to every corner of the globe, not just the EU. We have provided student finance for 2019-20 and will shortly be making an announcement on 2020-21. Any future decision on access to finance for EU nationals will come later on as part of the negotiations we will take forward. The hon. Gentleman’s logic is: why not ensure that access to student finance is free for every student internationally? The Labour Front Benchers have just proposed a policy that would ensure that British taxpayers pay for European students’ fees in their entirety. I do not feel that that is necessarily best value for the taxpayer, and I am not sure his constituents would either.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Despite what all the doomsayers constantly claim, will the Minister confirm for the record what is actually happening in relation to the numbers of foreign students coming into this country to study?

Chris Skidmore: As I stated, since 2017 there has been a 3.8% increase in EU students applying and a 4.9% increase in non-EU students. It is welcome that last year we had a record number of international students, both EU and non-EU, applying to our British universities. I congratulate all universities on being able to be so welcoming. We want that to continue.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Minister must know that the university recruitment cycle for 2020 is already under way, and the ability of UK universities to attract and recruit students from the EU will be seriously affected if the fee status remains uncertain. He has the ability to settle this matter today. We do not need to vote for a flawed withdrawal agreement; the Minister could simply roll the current arrangements forward.

Chris Skidmore: I recognise the hon. Lady’s point, which was made to me by Vivienne Stern, the director of Universities UK International. The recruitment procedures are ongoing. Applications for the 2021 academic year will open in September, and I am keen for the Government to make an announcement shortly. We have to go through cross-Government processes, which is one of the reasons why we have seen this unfortunate leak in the first place. As a Minister, I am keen to ensure that we can put that security in place for universities. I hope to ensure that we can do so in due course.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): With four of 10 of the top universities globally being in the UK, international students are fortunate to be able to access higher education in this country. As a member of the International Development Committee, I am keen that students from the developing world have the same access. Does the Minister agree that students from relatively well-off EU countries should not be subsidised at the cost of students in non-EU countries? Applying to our British universities. I am determined to ensure that I fulfil my manifesto commitments to my constituency, which also voted to leave, by making sure that that happens. I want to ensure that we can mitigate any circumstances that may arise from leaving the European Union, to ensure that we continue to benefit from the opportunities that we have had as a member as we move forward into the new relationship with our EU partners and also move forward internationally.

On the votes, when it comes to looking at the deal and the future economic partnership, I ask the hon. Lady to please, although it sounds like she will not—[Interruption.] Brexit is happening, and we need to ensure that we have—[Interruption.] Hon. Members seem to query that and suggest that they do not want it to happen, but I am afraid that is what the British people voted for. I am sure that when we, as a House—[Interruption.] I cannot actually believe what I am hearing from Opposition Members. When they stood in 2017, they also said that they were going to respect the result of the referendum; it sounds like they do not believe in the manifesto commitments that they made.

However, I believe that the deal is a good one. It is vital for scientific and education partnerships going forward, which it will protect for the next two years, and will allow for future negotiations, in order to make sure that we can continue to work with our European neighbours.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As a member of the board of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and for Crawley (Henry Smith) about the importance of encouraging students from low-income countries to come here. I would like us to provide more scholarships and bursaries out of our international development fund than we do at the moment; we are falling behind quite a number of other countries, but by doing that we can increase our influence. Does the
Minister agree that it is absolutely vital to avoid any kind of cliff edge and have a smooth transition from the arrangement we have now, which is beneficial, to the future arrangement, and that we do not suddenly cut off opportunities, both for our students studying in the European Union and vice versa?

Chris Skidmore: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. When it comes to tropical diseases, future scientific research on climate change or the opportunities that agri-tech might present to developing countries, it is absolutely right that we look at what we can do to play our part to help the poorest countries across the globe in those endeavours. I will be happy to discuss with him, and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine when I am next up in Liverpool, any potential policy initiatives that he might have in this sphere.

On the point about a transition period, the deal is a transition. We will be able then to get round the table and open up the square brackets around our future relationship, which are currently closed because of Members’ indecision and failure to back this EU deal—the EU helped to put it together and backs it also—so that we can move forwards together, safeguarding scientific partnerships and working on education partnerships.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): In many of his responses, the Minister has seemed to imply that being a member of the EU was stopping the UK having people from elsewhere in the world, but that is up to the Home Office here. He must recognise that the workforce is the biggest problem for all four UK health services. Medical and dental degrees take five years. Does he seriously think people will come here, pay enormous fees and then at three years roll the dice on whether they get a continuing visa?

Chris Skidmore: It is important to reflect that leaving the EU provides us with an opportunity to decide our own immigration policy—we are beginning that work for 2021 onwards, which is why we have the immigration White Paper and consultation—and the freedom to decide our own immigration policy. On the future position of fees, obviously we have been in the EU and have reciprocal fee requirements, but we also want to make sure that international students are not discriminated against, as they currently are—the hon. Lady cannot deny that international student fees are significantly more than those for EU students. It is important that we listen to universities about what future schemes for immigration and student exchange should look like.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister says he wants us to continue to enjoy the current benefits of our EU membership but after we have left the EU and that he wants us to vote for a withdrawal agreement to end discrimination against international students, but there is absolutely nothing stopping him today ruling out this increase in fees for EU students and the wider international student body. It matters greatly that we can attract people but also offer our young people those opportunities in EU countries. Does he not understand that his failure to rule out these increases today will have an impact on the decisions of students for 2019-20 in both the EU and the wider international student body?

Chris Skidmore: We have already guaranteed home fees status for EU students for the 2019-20 academic year. The decision for 2020-21 will be made shortly and applications will open in September 2019. I think that the guarantee for 2019-20 shows we are keen to work on this in the negotiations. It is a cross-Government piece of work. As I have mentioned, it is vital that we work on issues such as immigration and build international relationships, but that involves the Foreign Office and the Department for International Trade, which are involved in the international education strategy, which is why I cannot give such a guarantee on the Floor of the House. It is important that we have a joined-up piece of work from the Government and that we guarantee our responsibilities to our European partners—and I hope that, to do that, the House will vote for the deal to give us that opportunity—while continuing to build on commitments internationally.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Surely, the Minister must accept as a point of general principle that if a student wants to come to the UK to do an undergraduate degree, they should be able to apply for and obtain a visa that covers the whole period of that undergraduate degree and that it is utterly unfair and counterproductive to ask them to apply for a completely different type of visa either three quarters or three fifths of the way through.

Chris Skidmore: On this point about European temporary leave to remain, which we also discussed in oral questions earlier, I have spoken to the Scottish Higher Education Minister, Richard Lochhead, about the 36 months and the issue of moving to a four-year course, which disproportionately affects Scottish universities, and I have relayed those concerns to the Home Office. I hope that, given the White Paper approach to consultation, we can consider the implementation of a wide range of issues, including visas and the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. However, it is important to recognise that it is permissible to apply for a tier 4 visa to continue to study.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that the number of EU nationals applying to UK universities is already falling and will be down this year, even before Brexit bites fully? How does he suggest that universities should mitigate that loss of student numbers on the roll?

Chris Skidmore: There are currently a record 139,000 EU students at UK universities, and the number of EU applications has risen by 3.8% since 2017. It is important for us to put out a positive message rather than encouraging European students who may happen to be watching our exchanges not to apply. Of course they should apply. People say, “Erasmus will be affected, so do not apply,” but the Government have given guarantees on Erasmus, on science research funding and on 2019-20 home fee status. We will make announcements about 2020-21 before September, so that students will have the necessary knowledge when they apply.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): A 17-year-old constituent of mine came to my surgery a few weeks ago in great distress. She has lived here for 16 years, since she was one year old. She is at St Roch’s
Secondary School and wants to take a place at college, but she cannot obtain student finance to do so because, according to the rules, she does not qualify within the meaning of the Immigration Act 1971. Does the Minister not recognise that that is an absurd aberration? What will he do to help my constituent?

Chris Skidmore: I will happily take a look at that specific issue and take it up with the Student Loans Company, which I visited in Glasgow about a month ago, and I am happy to continue our correspondence about the issue.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Our higher education sector has been one of the great success stories of recent years, and we have seen huge expansion, which has been predicated on our being part of the European Union and attracting the best international students. The Minister speaks of talking this country down, but the reality is that universities such as Warwick, which is part of the Russell Group, have lost 3% of undergraduate applications from the EU and 9% of postgraduate applications. Will the Minister meet me, and the vice-chancellor of Warwick University—one of our finest international universities—to discuss his proposals and what their economic and financial impact will be?

Chris Skidmore: I should be happy to have the opportunity to meet the hon. Gentleman and the vice-chancellor of Warwick University. I do not remember exactly where Warwick comes in my universities tour, but it may be coming up shortly. I recognise its international importance. I last visited it two years ago, in a different ministerial guise, and had the opportunity to meet Lord Bhattacharyya, who, sadly, departed recently. He worked across an international field to establish the university’s manufacturing centre.

I listen to concerns that are expressed. I have quoted figures that have been published, but some Members have raised issues relating to the current academic year, in respect of which figures have not been published. I want to ensure—as I do when I go to Brussels, when it comes to some of the negotiations on Horizon Europe—that I make the positive case that we want to protect postgraduate students in particular. We are committed to spending 2.4% of GDP on research and development, and if we are to hit that target by 2027, it is vital that we have a pipeline of talent that is national, European and international. That was a long answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question, but, yes, I will certainly meet him and the vice-chancellor.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was pleased to hear that the Minister will shortly visit the University of Huddersfield. As he is coming north, I wonder whether he would like to travel a little further and visit the University of Hull. We should be very pleased to see him.

Many EU students are currently studying at Hull University. Can the Minister guarantee that no matter what they are studying, as undergraduates or postgraduates, they will not be affected by the proposed changes?

Chris Skidmore: I would certainly be delighted to come up to the University of Hull, which is one of the homes of one of my poetic heroes, Philip Larkin. I think also that Lord Norton of Louth still teaches politics at Hull. I would be keen, but I cannot guarantee that that would be on the same day as Huddersfield. However, going forward, if we can get the deal across the line—again, I urge Members to allow the opportunity to be able to begin future negotiations on education partnerships and on looking at both science and research when it comes to higher education—I want to ensure that we have the opportunity to provide those guarantees post 2021, although, obviously, we have made the guarantee for 2019-20. We will shortly be making announcements when it comes to the 2020-21 academic year. Going forward, that will be a matter for future negotiations with our EU partners.

Mr Speaker: I was reading Philip Norton’s text books as part of my undergraduate studies 35 years ago, but of course, Philip Norton was a very, very young man as a distinguished academic at that time. He does not seem to have got much older as far as I can tell.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): These exchanges have shown exactly the problems with the political declaration: the Minister talks about guarantees, but of course they are not guarantees; they are aspirations for future negotiation. But there is one thing he could do today, which is reassure the 17,000 Erasmus+ students who are likely to be approved in May or June this year about 2021. Could he at least do that?

Chris Skidmore: The Government guarantee, when it comes to participation in the Erasmus programmes, has stated that all successful participations as approved by the EU Commission will be eligible for the Government guarantee. I wrote to every single Higher Education Minister in Europe and the European economic area to ensure that they were aware of that guarantee commitment—many were not. I think that it is often a case of communication to make sure people are aware so that when it comes to those Erasmus participations being approved, the Government will fund them—not just for the year, but for the entirety of the exchange programme as it takes place.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On EU students, the Minister will know that, as he plans to raise the drawbridge into England through raising fees, in Wales we intend to keep a welcome in the hillside by keeping fees down. What impact does he imagine that differential fee rates will have on local economies? Does he not think it premature to announce raising fees when we have not exited on exit day, we are likely to have a European election and we might not—I hope not—leave the EU at all?

Chris Skidmore: Again, we have made no announcement on raising any fees. The future decision on fee rates for EU students has yet to be made, as I stated in my opening remarks. The hon. Gentleman is right that setting tuition fees is a devolved matter. I work closely with devolved Ministers, and also make sure that we have a united approach in the United Kingdom to Welsh, Scottish and English university policy. However, I also totally respect the right of Welsh higher education policy makers to be able to look at different systems—for example, the Diamond review looked at access and part-time study.

We can learn a lot from each other in due course, and I have already been to Cardiff to meet the vice-chancellor Colin Riordan, who has raised research issues. Obviously,
that is a UK-specific reserved matter, and I think it is important that we continue those dialogues, but I would say that no decisions have been made. We have provided the certainty on 2019-20, and an announcement on 2020-21 will be made shortly. Any future policies will be part of those future negotiations, which, if we can have the EU deal voted through by the House, we will be able to get on with.

Rape Victims: Disclosure of Evidence

4.33 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service whether he will make a statement on requests by the police for victims of rape to provide their mobile phone and other digital devices.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Mr Speaker—[Interruption.] Not now, mother.

There is widespread recognition that disclosure in criminal cases must be improved. As the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), whom I still call my friend, knows, disclosure of evidence is crucial for ensuring the public’s confidence in the police and in our criminal justice system. It is important to note that police forces have been using forms to request victims’ consent to review mobile phones in investigations, including sexual assault cases, for some time. What is new is the national form that was introduced today, which attempts to distil current best practice and to replace the individual versions being used by the 43 police forces, to ensure that there is consistency and clarity for complainants. That is the intention of the police.

In considering seeking such consent, the police must consider what is a reasonable line of inquiry and ensure that their approach avoids unnecessary intrusion into a complainant’s personal life. In July 2018, the Director of Public Prosecutions issued advice on investigating communications evidence, making it clear that the examination of the mobile telephones of complainants should not be pursued as a matter of course and that, where it was pursued, the level of extraction should be proportionate.

This Government have made protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims and survivors of sexual violence a key priority, and it is encouraging that more victims than ever before have had the confidence to come forward. However, it is surely critical that victims are not deterred from seeking justice by a perception of how their personal information is handled. They can and should expect nothing less than that it will be dealt with in a way that is consistent with their right to privacy and with the interests of justice.

This is clearly a complex area, and while disclosure is an important component of the criminal justice system in ensuring a fair trial, the police have acknowledged that the use of personal data in criminal investigations is a source of anxiety. They will continue to work with victim groups and the Information Commissioner’s Office to ensure that their approach to this issue strikes the necessary, if difficult, balance between the requirement for reasonable lines of inquiry and the victim’s right to privacy. I can assure the House that the Government will continue to work with partners in the criminal justice system to deliver the recommendations in the Attorney General’s review designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of disclosure.

Anna Soubry: I thank the Minister for his response. I have indeed read the document to which he refers. Rape is among the most serious and heinous of crimes carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Victims of all crimes frequently feel that they are treated more like the accused. For example, they are required to
provide fingerprints for the purposes of elimination and asked to give their consent for their medical records to be disclosed, and rape victims have to undergo intimate medical examinations after suffering the most appalling violations. However, it is the way in which we deal with these requests that is critical. What we must not do is issue a blanket demand for the handover of mobile phones and other digital devices and then threaten to discontinue a case if a victim, especially a rape victim, refuses to hand them over.

Will the Minister answer the following questions? Will he withdraw this document, because it is going to deter victims of rape in particular from coming forward? Will he ensure that there is no blanket request for rape victims—or, indeed, any other victims—to hand over phones and other digital devices? Instead, will he ensure that any request of victims—in particular, the victims of rape and other sexual offences—is made only if the investigation, including the account of the accused, has been properly looked at and it is the view of the investigating officer, having considered all the material, that such a request should be made? Will the Minister withdraw any document that states—and condemn all assertions—that cases will be dropped if the victim does not agree to hand over any material or device to the police? Does he agree that those threats are unacceptable?

Will the Minister confirm that it is already the practice of Crown Court judges to ask, at the plea and trial preparation hearing, whether all digital material has been obtained and preserved? Does he agree that if the existing law, guidance and practice directions on disclosure were followed, they would do justice to both the victim and the accused, and that their being followed properly by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service would ensure that further distress and threats to rape victims and other victims of crime would not be necessary?

Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions. She is of course absolutely right to describe rape as a heinous crime. She is also right to remind the House that there is nothing new about requesting personal, highly sensitive information from those alleging the crime. She is also absolutely right that that needs to be done with the utmost sensitivity. She may have a different perspective—views may differ around the House—but I believe that the police have made considerable improvements over recent years in that respect.

I have read the document, and the right hon. Lady has asked me to withdraw it. It is not my document, because the process is led by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. What I can say to her, concerned as she is about the risk that the process might lead to those alleging rape not coming forward, is that an impact assessment has been carried out and we will take a strong interest in it. It is not a blanket request. As she knows, the police and the CPS proceed on a case-by-case basis. They have a heavy responsibility to pursue reasonable lines of inquiry and to make such a request only when they consider it relevant.

The right hon. Lady referred to the language in the document, and I think she asserted that the police were suggesting that if someone did not hand over their phone, it would no longer be possible for the investigation or prosecution to continue. I may be misrepresenting her, but that is what I heard. Language is important, as she knows, and the document states:

“If you refuse permission for the police to investigate, or for the prosecution to disclose material which could enable the defendant to have a fair trial then it may not be possible for the investigation or prosecution to continue.”

I have discussed that with the police, and they see it as a reasonable statement of fact, but the language used is sensitive and can be discussed with the police and others to see how it may be improved.

My final point comes to the fundamental underlying issue. As the right hon. Lady and everyone in the House knows, we have had a long history of failure in relation to the disclosure system, which sits at the heart of our criminal justice system and public confidence and trust in it. There has to be a response, and the CPS and the police are working closer together than ever before on this. The national disclosure improvement plan, which is now in its second phase, is an extremely credible piece of work, and it fits with that work to try to rebuild confidence in our criminal justice system. She knows that there is a balance to be struck between pursuing reasonable lines of inquiry and protecting privacy, and I have tried to strike the right balance, but they are open to improving it if improvement is needed.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Many of us struggle to be away from our mobile phones for half an hour, let alone any longer, so can the Minister reassure me that the police will be sufficiently funded to take phones away from alleged victims for the shortest possible time and to interrogate them with the most up-to-date equipment?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is entirely right. We all know how attached we, our friends and our children are to the mobile phone. It plays a fundamental role in our lives, and the prospect of being detached from it is genuinely alarming. I can give that undertaking. The police are aware of the need to minimise the length of time that a phone is taken away from someone. At the heart of my hon. Friend’s inquiry is a question about technology, the ability to process information quickly, the requirements of the criminal justice system and improvements to the disclosure process.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I commend the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for applying for it.

The latest Home Office figures show that the proportion of reported rapes reaching prosecution is now at 1.7%, which is an appalling statistic. The rate was at 1.9% in January, so clearly the situation is getting even worse. The Minister knows that the issue of disclosure in our criminal justice system has been a running sore for this Government, with hundreds of cases dropped on that basis, and it is not good enough.

The Minister must accept that the Government’s cuts to resources, to the police and to the Crown Prosecution Service have restricted the capacity of those organisations to investigate and sift evidence. The Government need to get disclosure right. Of course we need relevant evidence to be disclosed in all cases, but there is a big difference between that and those who make a complaint of rape having to open up their entire digital life to be picked over.
We cannot have a situation in which complainants are asked to sign consent forms authorising the investigation of their data without limit, with the case not being taken forward if they refuse. I heard what the Minister said about the language on the form itself but if, in practice, that means, “Give us your mobile phone or the case will be dropped,” that is no way to run any criminal investigation and it will deter victims even further from coming forward.

Given the level of concern that has been expressed today, can the Minister confirm that all complainants will be entitled to fully funded, independent legal advice before they sign these consent forms? Can he at least make that pledge today? When are the Government going to accept that more resources are needed for our police and our whole criminal justice system? When will the Minister finally get this issue of disclosure right and stop failing victims?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman lets himself down by trying to make cheap political points on this issue, because we are talking about a very serious matter in our criminal justice system and its integrity. He and other Opposition Members know that the problem of disclosure has run for a very long time, going way back into the 1990s, and I would have hoped that there would be cross-party support for what is being done to make radical improvements to that process.

The hon. Gentleman will also know that one of the big game changers in recent decades has been the exponential growth in the volume of digital data and the challenge that that brings to the police. He continues to give the impression that what has been announced today is a new process, but the police have been taking and requesting access to mobile phones for some time. What today represents is a well-intentioned attempt by the police to bring together best practice in a national form so that there is consistent practice across the country and so that consent is as well informed as possible—that is the intention of this form.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I was never a specialist in criminal law, but my time as a barrister taught me that, during litigation or prosecution, both sides come under an ongoing duty of disclosure. That is a vital principle of our justice system, made all the more important in this context where we have seen a number of rape and serious violence cases collapse upon the emergence of subsequent evidence. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what has been proposed is proportionate, reasonable and sensitive, and therefore is not anti-victim but pro-justice?

Mr Hurd: I believe so. We have to be clear that there is some risk, but there is also a counter-risk, to which my hon. Friend alludes, that continued disclosure failures would lead to more cases, such as that of Liam Allan and others, collapsing at the last moment, which is disastrous for everyone involved. No one should pretend it is easy, but we are very clear, and the House should be very clear, that we need to make material, rapid improvements to the disclosure processes, because they are the heart of the integrity of our criminal justice system.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I think everyone in the House wants to see justice done and the truth established through the investigation of all relevant evidence, but I hope we can also all agree that that cannot and does not justify a general trawl through the private life of any citizen. Investigations in pursuit of information must be evidence-led and targeted. That can involve, as the Minister said, a difficult balance, but the policy, as reported today, gets that balance totally wrong.

There is a world of difference between, on the one hand, seeking to establish whether a particular telephone call was made or a text was sent and, on the other hand, insisting on carte blanche to fish through whatever is on a phone. Has the Minister even assessed whether this policy can be justified under the European convention on human rights or data protection laws? More fundamentally, as Rape Crisis Scotland has argued today, is there not a huge danger that such a policy will put people off reporting rape and sexual violence? Just what measures are in place to protect the privacy of those to whom such requests have been made? Surely there must be a more proportionate and sensible way to support justice and protect privacy at the same time.

Mr Hurd: I have some sympathy with some of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. One very welcome bit of progress we have made as a society in recent years is in building the confidence and trust of victims of previous hidden crimes, be they domestic violence, sexual violence, rape or modern slavery, to come forward—frankly, I am damned if we are going to go backwards on that. I think the House is united on that. Of course there is some underlying risk, which we will monitor extremely carefully through the impact assessment, but I am serious about the counter-risk. If the police do not get consents and if we really do restrict access to mobile phones in this day and age, we will undermine the process of critical improvement in our disclosure process. As I said, the counter-risk is of cases continuing to collapse at the last minute, which is the worst possible outcome. I am sure that he and I would both wish to avoid it.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The victims of rape are not only those who have had this terrible crime done to them, but people who have been wrongly accused. A young friend of mine was wrongly accused of rape, making his life a misery for months and months; he was bursting into tears and all the rest of it because of the stress. Only through telephone evidence that emerged was it shown that his accuser had been sexting him—this was despite his denials; he had not seen this person for years. So may I just say to the Minister that he should say to the police that this is the right course of action? Of course it has to be proportionate, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) said, justice has to be done, and that includes for those people who have been accused of rape when in fact they are innocent.

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes an important point in an extremely impressive way. The whole House is united in wanting to see the country make more progress in prosecuting and convicting for rape in a more effective way. My right hon. Friend Suella Braverman (Anna Soubry) says, it is an absolutely heinous crime and there is huge space for us to improve. However, we have to be mindful, not least in the light of very recent
highly publicised cases, of the damage when things go wrong, as in the case of Liam Allan, where lives and personal lives are ruined as a result of failures in the disclosure system and cases collapse at the last minute. That is a terrible outcome for absolutely everyone. I impress on the House that underpinning this proposal is a desire of the police to improve the understanding of what they are requesting so that consent is better informed.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): rose—

Mr Speaker: I call the Mother of the House, Harriet Harman.

Ms Harman: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I agree with the way this was put by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and I agree about just how serious the problem is. Let me tell the House about an email I received this morning from a young woman I know. I did not know she had been sexually assaulted. She said, “Six months ago, I was seriously sexually assaulted by a complete stranger. Two months after the assault, the police demanded full access to my phone, including my Facebook and Instagram passwords, my photos, stretching back to 2011, notes, texts, emails and the full history of 128 WhatsApp groups and individuals’ conversations stretching back over five years. I had no prior or subsequent contact with my attacker. I lie awake at night worrying about the details of private conversations with friends, boyfriends, business contacts, family that are now in the hands of the police. It is a gross intrusion into my privacy and theirs. I feel completely as if I am the one on trial.”

We all know, as the Minister has said, that disclosure is a problem, but we also know that there is massive under-reporting of rape cases. We also know that one of the problems in rape cases is that the victim is attacked in court and put on trial herself. The “Digital device extraction” document that has been issued today says quite simply, “Give us all your devices. We will download and review all the material, including deleted material, so that we can give it to the suspect and use it in the trial”. I know the Minister is committed to justice for victims as well as for defendants—I totally accept his good faith in this matter—so I implore him not to dig in and say that this is a good thing. There is a real problem out there that has been exposed, and he really needs to take action on it.

Mr Hurd: The Mother of the House is entirely right to state that a huge and complex raft of problems underlies this issue, and to point out that in the past there have been—but I hope not in future—failings in how the police used their powers and fulfilled their duties and responsibilities in this area. One thing from which I take encouragement is the police leadership’s candour in recognising that at the heart of this is a problem of culture in the police, and a need for them to take disclosure more seriously and not see it as an administrative bolt-on.

The guidance could not make it more explicit that complainants’ mobile telephones should not be examined as a matter of course, and that where they are, the level of extraction should be proportionate. The guidance makes that clear, and we expect the police to follow it. The Mother of the House makes good points about the workings of the courts in this area, and that is a priority for both Ministers who flank me—the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins).

Mr Speaker: It is important that our proceedings are intelligible for all those observing them, so if there are people present who are unaware of the significance of the Mother of the House, it ought to be explained. The Mother of the House is the female Member with the longest uninterrupted service. In the case of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), if memory serves me correctly that uninterrupted service dates back to 28 October 1982, so the Mother of the House has served in the House for 36 years, six months and one day. I just thought it was important to make that clear. Whether or not people think it was important to make it clear, I have made it clear, and that is the situation.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I am the mother on the Government Benches. Mr Speaker: I am very happy to accept that that is indeed the case, but as the right hon. Lady does not wish to contribute at the moment, we will hold her in reserve. We will hear from her presently.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Rape is a heinous and horrible crime, and I have seen its consequences at first hand, so I am fully aware, so far as any man can be, of its impact on a woman. At the same time, there are also concerns that if a man is found guilty but is not, that man’s reputation is damaged for the rest of his life. Knowing rape cases as I do, having been a journalist for some 17 years and having covered the courts, I know that it is common for the defence to attack a woman’s reputation. I would like to hear from the Minister what is to prevent that happening. If the police have all this evidence going back many years, as we have heard, what can be done to ensure that only the relevant information is selected? Who will choose what that relevant information is?

Mr Hurd: Underlying this issue are decisions around reasonable lines of inquiry and tests of relevance made by the police, the prosecution and, ultimately, a judge, so there are, as my hon. Friend knows, checks and balances in the system. I come back to my fundamental point: I urge the House not to lose sight of the context of this initiative from the police, which is their taking a further step to improve the understanding of what they are trying to do to balance the right to privacy with their duty to pursue reasonable lines of inquiry. That is the context of this debate.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Of course the police must have an effective disclosure regime. The Minister just referred to there being checks and balances in the system to prevent inquiries being inappropriate, but he will know that those checks and balances are already not working, and that they are not even embedded in this document. This document goes in the opposite direction. I urge him to read the form from the point of view of a rape victim.
who has just been through an awful ordeal. From their point of view, it looks as though they will have their phone taken away, potentially for several months; as though the police will be able to look into all corners of it and into every aspect of their life; as though any of that information could be given to the person who raped them; and as though there are no safeguards in place at all. It is pretty obvious that the form will deter people coming forward and pursuing cases concerning these awful crimes with the police. Surely, in the interests of justice for women who are victims of awful crimes, the Minister should pull this document back and get the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to rewrite it.

Mr Hurd: Coming as it does from the Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, that message will be heard loud and clear by both the police and the CPS. I think that this is an honest attempt by the police to pull together best practice from across a very fragmented system, in which these forms look different in different places in the country, which is wrong. It tries to pull something that is more consistent, and that tries to inform complainers in a better way about what may or may not happen with their phone, and the consequences of that.

I have spoken to the police about this, because the Government are extremely sensitive to any risk of compounding people’s stress or trauma in this situation. The police have assured me that they have worked closely with victim groups and others on this document, and they are absolutely open to continuing to work with groups to improve it if there is a clear feeling that it needs to be improved. I will certainly take that up with them in the light of this urgent question.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Has the Minister given any thought to whether there is a need for independent authorisation as another safeguard, given that such an invasion of a woman’s privacy will be undertaken through this form?

Mr Hurd: I respect where that point comes from and I come back to my main point, which is that this is not a new process; it is a new form, which the police are open to improving if there is a strong view that it needs to be improved. The motivation behind the form is to try to ensure that consent to handing over mobile phones is better informed. This process is currently done differently across the country, which does need to be remedied.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The charity that I ran the London marathon for this weekend—Barnsley Sexual Abuse and Rape Crisis Services—sees at first hand the trauma faced by survivors of rape, and I thank everyone who sponsored me to support its vital work. In South Yorkshire, 50 out of 1,400 reported rapes over the past year resulted in a charge; that is just 3.5%. This is completely unacceptable. Let me ask the Minister again: does he honestly believe that survivors of rape giving up their privacy is the solution to addressing these shocking statistics?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her success in the marathon, and on fundraising for a very valuable charity. She is right that the volume of rape prosecutions has fallen. I have spoken to that; it is a concern for us. However, I ask her to respect the point that I am trying to make, which is that the police are already in the business of asking people for their mobile phones, because we all understand that there are things on mobile phones these days that could be incredibly important and relevant to their investigations. This process happens already, and it is because of the recognition of the difficulty around it that the police are trying to improve the system across the country through this national form. Now, it may be a good form or a bad form, and the police are open to improving it if it can be improved, but that is the motivation. I would guard against Members trying to tie this matter in with other issues, however important.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister define what he regards as “reasonable”? The point has already been made clearly that there may be many areas of a victim’s life that it is not reasonable for the victim to disclose to the accused, the police or the investigating authorities. I want to know exactly what rights the victim has to refuse to give information, and what impact that would have on any potential case.

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Gentleman, with his experience as a Minister, knows that what represents a reasonable line of inquiry is an investigative matter for the police,
and that although the prosecution will do what they can to assist in identifying potential further inquiries, those suggestions will not be taken by the police as definitive or exhaustive. The right hon. Gentleman talks about compulsion; he will know that we are talking about a form that asks for consent. Consent is not, by definition, compulsory.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In September last year, the Government published, with great fanfare, the victims strategy, but it is very hard to believe that those who wrote the document published today have read the Government’s own policy for victims. Given the huge number of women and men who have experienced sexual violence and are not reporting it—according to the Office for National Statistics, 87% of people suffering sexual violence do not report it—is it not vital that we ensure that nothing is done to prevent people from coming forward, that this document is reviewed, and that the Minister takes personal responsibility for ensuring that it is reviewed in the light of the Government’s strategy and what the House has said clearly today?

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Gentleman has served in the Government, so he knows that we sometimes have to wrestle with difficult balances. There is an extremely difficult balance to be struck between supporting the police in fulfilling their duty to follow all reasonable lines of inquiry, and our common desire to do everything we can to respect individuals’ privacy.

I come back to the heart of what the police are trying to do. This is not a new process. They are now in the business of gathering evidence from mobile phones. People are handing over phones, however difficult that is. This is an honest attempt to try to bring greater consistency and better information into the system, to try to help potential victims of rape understand the process better. I am absolutely sure that that is the intention. Whether it is being executed in the best way is clearly something on which this House has different views. Having spoken to the police, I am absolutely sure that they will be listening to this carefully. They are genuinely open to discussing with all interested parties how this can be improved. We have to get this difficult balance right.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On 11 April, I asked the Solicitor General whether there will be meaningful guidance for the police and the CPS about the use and trawling of individuals’ digital data. From this form, it does not look as though that has been taken on board. It feels as though the process for disclosure is about the character and credibility of the victim, not the perpetrator who is on trial. Will the Minister rewrite the guidance? Will he set out how long a victim should prepare for not having their phone; whether a timescale could be set; and, importantly, whether the police will be transparent about what data has been copied over when the phone is returned?

Mr Hurd: The requirement on the police in relation to transparency already exists. On the guidance, again, I make it clear to the hon. Gentleman and to the House that the Director of Public Prosecutions’ advice on investigating communications data makes it clear that the examination of complainants’ mobile telephones should not be pursued as a matter of course, and that where it is pursued, the level of extraction should be proportionate. That is the guidance that both the police and the CPS understand, respect, and are implementing.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): Of course there has to be disclosure relevant to the defence—nobody would dispute that—but this is about the question of what is relevant, especially when, as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) said, an alleged assailant is a complete stranger. The impact of this full disclosure requirement, and the headlines in the newspapers, was truly atrocious. Potential victims of sexual assault or rape will have seen some of those headlines, whether it be “Digital strip-search” or “Hand over your phone now”. This is nothing short of a public relations disaster in our criminal justice system. The Minister really should take up the opportunity to review this document and correct that; otherwise fewer people will come forward and report crimes.

Mr Hurd: I certainly do not want that outcome, and neither does anyone else in this House. That would be a retrograde step. My instinct is to check the facts and look at the impact assessment, but if the mood of the House is that this document is not right, then I will certainly take that up with the police and the CPS. The hon. Gentleman knows that what is a reasonable line of inquiry is an investigative matter for the police and the CPS. On the definition of “relevant”, I am not a lawyer—the Chamber is probably bristling with lawyers—but there are many years of case study to help us to understand that point.
**HS2: Buckinghamshire**

5.12 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the proposals from Buckinghamshire County Council requesting that all enabling work for HS2 in Buckinghamshire is paused until notice to proceed to the main works contractors has been approved.

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently point out at this stage that the question is narrowly about Buckinghamshire; it is not the occasion for a general debate about HS2. I will consider the Minister’s reply in making a judgment about whether it has been broadened, but at this point it is narrow.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Completing HS2 is Government policy and is crucial to unlocking economic growth and improved productivity in the midlands and north. It is supported by Members on both sides of this House. I therefore have no intention of halting work on HS2 in Buckinghamshire or elsewhere. There are already 7,000 people and 2,000 businesses working to deliver the HS2 project, and early works are well under way. Once HS2 Ltd has reached agreement with its suppliers and the Government are satisfied about both affordability and value for money, we will make a full business case for phase 1. This will inform notice to proceed, which is the formal contractual process that enables each phase 1 supplier to move from design and development to construction. Notice to proceed is scheduled to take place later this year. The works that are now taking place are necessary to enable the construction of HS2 to move forward in accordance with the programme, following notice to proceed.

We are aiming for HS2 to be one of the most environmentally responsible infrastructure projects ever delivered in the UK, and managing its impact on the environment during construction is a high priority. HS2 will deliver a new green corridor made up of more than 650 hectares of new woodland, wetland and wildlife habitats alongside the line. More than 7 million new native trees and shrubs will be planted, to help blend the line into the landscape and leave a lasting legacy of high-quality green spaces all along the route. It will include more than 33 sq km of new and existing wildlife habitat—an increase of around 30%, compared with what is there now. Many of the early works that are now taking place on HS2 are activities aimed precisely at creating this environmental legacy. They are being done now to ensure that they become fully established as early as possible, alongside construction of the railway.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The notice to proceed for HS2 has again been delayed, I believe until December. In the meantime, enabling works continue to blight large parts of the county, and this error-ridden project is costing our local authorities more and more. The situation is critical, with the area of outstanding natural beauty suffering irreparable environmental damage from preparatory works, rather than the “legacy” the Minister just referred to, and the costs spiralling out of control, when this project could well be cancelled. Indeed, millions are being spent on consultants to try to reduce the costs, which will in all likelihood result in failure to deliver on environmental protections and promises.

Already hedgerows have been netted or removed, machinery has been brought in to remove mature oak trees, country road verges have been destroyed by HGVs, massive ugly earthworks have appeared at our prime tourist sites, construction worker camps are surrounded by prison-like barriers, and there is the horror of the depopulated areas where homeowners were forced to sell to HS2.

It is almost impossible to hold this monster to account. Written questions are answered so poorly that I have to submit freedom of information requests to elicit basic information. I want some straight answers today. Why is only a junior Minister with other responsibilities in charge of the largest infrastructure project in Europe, which costs more than Brexit? Surely it should have its own Minister, if not its own Department. In her written answer today and in her statement just now, the Minister gives the impression that the entire decision on the go-ahead of this project comes from her. Will she be the sole Minister responsible for issuing the notice to proceed?

Why has the cost of HS2 not been updated since 2015, and what are the actual costs at today’s prices? What is the latest evaluation of the cost-benefit analysis, and why has that not been done already? When will the Treasury review be completed, and will a full report be published? Is the delivery of HS2 still being flagged with an amber-red warning, and how regularly is Cabinet updated on this project? Has HS2 applied for and received all the environmental licences and permissions required to carry out this environmental vandalism in Buckinghamshire?

What level of control and monitoring does the Secretary of State exercise over the awarding of contracts and the finances, and if he does have a level of control, why has £1.7 million that was paid out in unauthorised redundancy payments not been recovered or any director held to account? What would it cost to cancel the project now? Why, with so many doubts and unanswered questions, will the Government not agree to a perfectly reasonable request from Bucks County Council to have a six-month pause to do a total re-evaluation of this project, which has already blown its timetable and its budget before it even has the go-ahead?

Mr Speaker: The Minister’s use of the words “along the route” in her initial reply has somewhat widened the scope, which is no doubt music to the ears of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and, to judge by his grinning countenance, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax).

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend has posed a number of questions, which I will do my best to get through. She has expressed her disappointment that I am not the Secretary of State, but I am indeed the Minister responsible for this project. Not only is the project this Government’s policy, but it was in the Conservative party’s manifesto as well as in the Labour party’s manifesto. It is absolutely right that the Minister responsible for the project continues to undertake to ensure that it stays on track.

This is a good opportunity to remind the House why HS2 is so important. It is indeed a national project, and it is the largest infrastructure project in Europe. It will
connect eight of our 10 biggest cities, connecting half of our country's population, so every Member of Parliament in this place will have constituents who are positively impacted by HS2. It will create thousands of jobs directly and over 100,000 jobs indirectly, and the net positive for our economy will be well beyond £94 billion over its lifetime.

We always talk about investment in our rail network and why we need to have extra capacity when it comes to HS2, but demand on the west coast line has increased by 190% since 1995 and we are close to being unable to add any more seats or trains. People often stand the whole way on long-distance journeys, and while delays are less frequent than in the past, we need a solution, and HS2 provides that solution. It is supported by a number of leaders up and down the country, but particularly in the midlands and the north, who often comment not only to the media but to me that they are quite fed up about people in the south commenting on what is needed in the north.

My right hon. Friend wanted to know about the notice to proceed. The notice to proceed is the point when HS2 Ltd instructs its main works civil contractors to begin construction of the phase 1 railway, as set out in the HS2 development agreement, which was in the Bill that went through in 2017.

My right hon. Friend talked about the impacts on Buckinghamshire, and she has been a very passionate campaigner for her constituency. I understand that her constituents will be feeling some of the impacts of HS2's construction, but the enabling works are absolutely crucial, especially when it comes to the environment. The early works are necessary to enable the construction of HS2 to proceed in accordance with the programme once notice to proceed is given. The existing programme of enabling works includes habitat creation, tree planting, ground investigation, the construction of work compounds, road improvements and utility diversions. This existing programme of enabling works has not changed, and it is the backbone of ensuring that further environmental mitigation can take place, which is why enabling works are so crucial. My right hon. Friend will know, because we have often talked about this, that HS2 is seeking to achieve no net loss in biodiversity across the route of the new railway.

My right hon. Friend also talked about the particular impacts in her constituency, and she has been a staunch campaigner on behalf of Buckinghamshire, which we know will be impacted by the line. A large section of the subsurface route, in the form of the 24 km Chilterns tunnel, has already been put through the hybrid Select Committee process. Furthermore, £3 million has been provided for the Chiltern area of outstanding natural beauty, and there are the £5 million woodland fund, the £30 million road safety fund and the £40 million community and environment and business and local economy funds. Buckinghamshire has already received over 30% of all the awards it could be afforded.

HS2 is a large infrastructure project—there is no denying that—but it is absolutely vital if we are to focus on smashing the north-south divide and provide opportunities for people who live beyond London and the south-east. It is and will be the most important economic regeneration project for a generation, and it is absolutely right that parliamentarians commit to long-term infrastructure projects that reflect the needs of our country.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The last three years of political turbulence should have taught the Government that politics has to change. The dictats from Westminster must be replaced by co-production with communities, listening to what they are saying. It is unbelievable that, yet again, the Secretary of State has failed to make it to the Dispatch Box.

Week by week, we hear of the spiralling costs of HS2, and in a week when Labour is declaring a national climate emergency, it is clear that the full carbon and environmental cost of HS2 will be deeply damaging across Buckinghamshire, not least to the irreplaceable Chilterns, if the connectivity, route and infrastructure are not refocused. It is not the concept of the project that is wrong, as urgent capacity is needed to secure a significant modal shift from cars and HGVs to passenger and freight lines, but the governance of HS2 must be overhauled and fully integrated into the network enhancements programme. Labour aspires to high speed rail, which has to have a focus on interconnectedness to facilitate investment and economic growth in the northern cities and to compete with the internal flight market, thus becoming a sustainable alternative. However, the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) is right to scrutinise the Secretary of State's handling of the project.

Why is the Minister proceeding before a full business case, the skills capability and the real cost have received further scrutiny in the light of evidence that these measures have changed? What discussions has she had with the National Audit Office and the Transport Committee over the widely held concerns expressed over HS2 costs and environmental impact? Does the Minister believe, as has been argued by the Tory leader of Buckinghamshire County Council, that ultra-fast broadband replaces ultra-fast rail? That certainly shows a lack of understanding in the Minister's party of the transport and economic needs of the north. Finally, will the Minister revisit the route plans to ensure that connectivity opportunities are maximised by this project?

Ms Ghani: Given how much playing of politics there was in that statement, one could forget that the Labour party actually supports HS2. In his “game changer” speech, the shadow Secretary of State for Transport spoke about its importance.

Before I go on to answer questions, we must remind ourselves that it is absolutely right that we do not focus only on what is required here in London and the south-east. In case they need reminding, I will tell shadow Front Benchers what Andy Burnham said recently:

“We don't need London commentators telling northern leaders what we need...We need HS2”.

He—[Interruption. If Opposition Front Benchers support northern Labour leaders, some support at the Dispatch Box, and when other opportunities arise, for the most important infrastructure project of our lifetimes is absolutely key.

I remind the House that Judith Blake, leader of Leeds City Council, said that HS2 is “the opportunity to transform the prospects for the north—perhaps a once in 200-year opportunity.”

I know you take a close personal interest in HS2, given your constituency, Mr Speaker. You may be aware that the all-party parliamentary group on the northern
[Ms Ghani]

powerhouse, which includes more than 80 MPs, recently put out a statement about how important HS2 is to ensure that we smash the north-south divide.

When there are criticisms of HS2 and constituents’ queries are not dealt with, it is absolutely right that we hold HS2 to account. Some individuals have to deal with the difficult impact of the line going near their homes. I am challenging HS2 repeatedly and will continue to do so. If any hon. Members have cases that have fallen short, I apologise, and I will be more than happy to hold further meetings.

As I mentioned earlier, this is one of our largest infrastructure projects and it will connect half of our country’s population. To adapt the motto of the Labour party, this line is for the many and not for the vested interests of the few who want to play politics with this important infrastructure project.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I am mindful of your own constituency, Mr Speaker, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) on her submissions just now. I simply want to ask the Minister this question. Does she think that this monstrous waste of money, which gives no benefit whatever to my constituents in Staffordshire, has been justified? Secondly, has she read the report commissioned by Mr Trevor Parkin and other constituents of mine, and written by Mr Michael Byng? It has completely exposed the utterable waste of money that the project represents. Will she please take note of these representations and do what I understand some members of the Cabinet are doing? They are saying that they have had enough of the project.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has worked tremendously hard on behalf of his constituency, and I think him for his question. He has been disappointed by some of the behaviour of HS2 Ltd and by the fact that some of his representations have not been favoured. I recognise all his work to represent his constituency, but unfortunately I do not agree with him. This project is incredibly important for the future of our country.

We cannot lament that we do not build long-term infrastructure projects or invest in our country for future growth, while at the same time not having confidence in vital projects such as HS2. It is not about decreasing journeys, even though that is absolutely key, but about bringing communities together, spreading wealth and job opportunities, and increasing capacity for both freight and people. We do not want everyone to assume that once they have finished their apprenticeship or job they have to get to London and the south-east to secure work. We need to ensure that companies move out of London and the south-east to Birmingham and other points on the line. That will create opportunities for everyone along this route.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Does the Minister understand that there is real frustration in towns across the country that the Government are putting billions of pounds into an ever-escalating budget for a rail project to connect cities, while at the same time huge numbers of towns, including in my constituency, have rubbish train connections and cannot even get investment for the additional carriages we need, never mind rail route upgrades? Will she undertake to provide a breakdown from her Department of the amount of capital rail funding going into projects for cities and the amount of money going into projects for towns?

Ms Ghani: I am more than happy to put together a note to put on paper the amount of investment we are making in our rail infrastructure in the north. There is one budget for HS2, and we are sticking to it.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I have sympathy for the Minister as a junior Minister being handed what looks increasingly like a poisoned chalice. I am also sympathetic to the fact that we cannot have an infrastructure project without environmental consequences. But does the Minister not understand that there is mounting disquiet about two things that are linked? First, the conduct of this project by HS2 is a shambles. It is particularly shambolic in its relations with local communities and in the fact that it takes a cavalier approach to any sort of engagement, including in closing down a nature reserve on the edge of my constituency and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) without any warning or notice at all.

Meanwhile, the costs escalate. I ask the question that my hon. Friend did not answer: is HS2 still being flagged as an amber-red warning? All the evidence suggests that the cost-benefit analysis is just not there. If that is the case, that should be of great concern across the House. My hon. Friend says we should keep politics out of it, but, forgive me, this is actually what politics is about: our collectively in this House paying some attention to whether public funds are being properly spent or not.

Ms Ghani: I have not been mansplained to at the Dispatch Box before, but here we are. I am indeed the Minister responsible for this project, and I was passionate about HS2 before I was given the portfolio. I may be a Member of Parliament for the south-east, but I grew up in Birmingham and HS2 just cannot come fast enough for us in the Midlands. I do not know what to say to my right hon. and learned Friend about his comments.

There is only one budget for HS2, and we will ensure that we can stick to that budget. That is why it is so important to get the business case together: not only to ensure that the costs are covered, but so that we can assess the positives it will bring to our economy. As I mentioned, the notice to proceed will be made public later in the year.

I understand my right hon. and learned Friend’s frustration about some of the conduct by HS2 Ltd and any upset it may have done to his community. Since I have been Minister, I have insisted on an increase in community engagement managers and that they are appropriately embedded in their community. When cases are brought to my attention, I challenge HS2. We also have a residents’ commissioner to undertake any concerns. It is unfortunate when a project this large is undermined by the behaviour of a few who do not appropriately manage relationships locally. As I said, when it has an impact on a Member’s constituency it is difficult for them to see the greater good it will do not only for that area but for the rest of the country.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), I have opposed HS2 from its inception; I recognise that she has been a sturdy fighter against it. I notice that the Minister has not answered questions on the total cost. She talks about the midlands benefiting from HS2, but Coventry will certainly not, because it will bypass Coventry. She says it will be a vehicle for ordinary people, but we do not actually know the train fares yet. Train fares on the west coast main line are very expensive to ordinary members of the public.

Ms Ghani: The train fares will be assessed and brought forward at the most appropriate time. We want this line to be accessible to everybody, and because thousands of people will travel on the line, we have to ensure that the fares are appropriate, as they will be. This line will be incredibly important, including to the midlands. I held a series of roundtables for midlands chambers of commerce, with one recently saying that it would be appalling if HS2 “were used as a political football... It is a key piece of national infrastructure at a time when we need to be showing something positive to the world.”

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): HS2 is a white elephant that grows ever larger on huge amounts of taxpayers’ cash. Back in 2013, when the project was unveiled, I predicted to the then Secretary of State that its cost would spiral to £100 billion, and he laughed. He was quite right to laugh, because if it is completed it will clearly cost far more than £100 billion. Does the Minister agree that the best thing to do is to scrap this project, lifting the blight from our constituents also feel that they are being trampled under the great white elephant of HS2.

Ms Ghani: If my hon. Friend was referring to, but I remind him that HS2 is a project that we should be proud of. If HS2 is completed it will clearly cost far more than £100 billion. Does the Minister agree that the best thing to do is to scrap this project, lifting the blight from our constituents also feel that they are being trampled under the great white elephant of HS2.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Government need a clearly funded plan for HS2, to make sure that it benefits communities in the north, rather than disadvantaged them. When will the Government accept that, without infrastructure investment on the east coast main line, the HS2 project’s second phase risks exacerbating the current capacity constraint and low speeds by increasing the number of trains on this already stretched line? Will the Government confirm when the east coast main line will receive investment, to make sure that it is ready for HS2? That could have the intended benefit of bringing together the north and the south, rather than making the north further away.

Ms Ghani: This project is to bring together north and south and east and west; we cannot have HS3, or any other name that they want to give an east-west line, without HS2. There is only one budget—£55.7 billion. The Minister with responsibility for trains has said that there is substantial investment in the east coast main line. The hon. Lady talked about wanting to increase capacity, and that is exactly what HS2 will do.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, our constituents also feel that they are being trampled under the great white elephant of HS2. My question relates to the difficulty I have in getting straight answers out of HS2 Ltd. I had a meeting in my office on 1 April in which I am afraid I was slightly bad-tempered, which is not my normal manner; I apologised, but this gets right under our skin. I have had no follow-up from that meeting, although I was promised real information. I echo the calls of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), because we need to pause this project while we get answers to important environmental questions.

Ms Ghani: If my hon. Friend was indeed enraged, all I can say is it will have been a very good meeting. I am sure HS2 will be listening to our exchanges. I know that a meeting took place on 1 April. I had hoped it would be productive. If it has not been, I will hold a meeting with her and work out what we can do to take this matter forward. She has some challenging cases to deal with and has made really good representations to me and HS2 Ltd. It is because this project will have an impact on the environment that we are doing everything we can to mitigate it, from planting over 7 million trees to ensuring no net loss in biodiversity, which are all things she is passionate about.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) for securing this urgent question. I have had a conversation with her and the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) about this project. We have seen significant cost overruns with Crossrail, so there isn’t one budget, is there? There is a significant over-budget. If the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who I would say is the finance director of the project, says we should probably cancel it, perhaps we should be listening—unless, of course, that is about her ambitions in the forthcoming Conservative party leadership contest. Tomorrow, I have a meeting with the managing director of Chiltern Railways, who suggests we should consider increasing capacity on existing track and additional track on the existing line. Would that not be a better use of the budget?

Ms Ghani: I am not sure who in the Treasury the hon. Gentleman was referring to, but I remind him that HS2 is a key priority of the Government and a manifesto commitment of the Conservative party, as it is of the Labour party. We are in peculiar political times, and I do not want to see one of the most important infrastructure projects of our lifetime being kicked around like a football. It is a long-term project, and it is important that we stay committed to it and ensure it remains on budget and on track. He mentioned a meeting with Chiltern Railways. I have just been reminded by my hon. Friend the Rail Minister that over £48 billion will be spent in control period 6.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister spoke in her opening remarks about the economic benefits for the midlands and the north, and it is because of the benefits that I have up until now supported HS2, but she will realise that benefits in 15-plus years’ time are a hard sell to passengers whose daily commute is being blighted. Would she consider rescheduling a project that is almost certainly going to overrun anyway and releasing some additional funding in the immediate future to improve local services and boost the economy of the north by, for example, providing additional freight capacity between the Humber ports and the west coast ports?

Ms Ghani: We are committed to funding railways in the north. My hon. Friend mentions investment around the ports, and he will see the work I have undertaken with Maritime 2050 to encourage investment in infrastructure and research and evaluation around maritime that will benefit his community. He makes a valid point. The project has taken a long time to get to this point—never mind the first scheduled trains—and as a long-term project it requires solid commitment from Ministers and Members of Parliament. If we are ever to undertake programmes of work that are truly transformative and long-term, we will have to show commitment over a long period. If £94 billion is returned to the economy and 100,000 jobs are created, it will play some part in regeneration in his community as well.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I have always supported this project—it will come through my constituency, but the benefits to my constituency will be huge in terms of jobs created, the rolling stock depot and various other aspects—but there is a problem. We were supposed to vote on phase 2b of the route in 2019, but that has been pushed back and back. My constituents near to the route are getting no answers or timeline and are having to battle tooth and nail to get compensation from HS2. I urge my hon. Friend to tell HS2 Ltd must get better. I am hearing that at the Dispatch Box, and HS2 will be hearing it too. HS2 must improve its community engagement: it must ensure that the community engagement managers are working effectively and in a timely fashion, and ensure that answers are given to the questions that are being posed. I do not think it is fair that Members of Parliament are having to make representations on behalf of their constituents. HS2 should be sorting out the issues so that they do not even reach MPs’ surgeries, and I shall be taking that back to it as well.

I know that my hon. Friend—a bit like me—wants the line to come as soon as possible, but there was a slight delay to ensure that we were considering Northern Powerhouse Rail. He may remember that there was also an election, which took up a substantial amount of time.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): If I recall correctly, HS2 was an unaffordable electoral carrot offered by Mr Blair and, I believe, Lord Adonis initially. It is regrettable that the Conservative party has taken it up, because it is unaffordable. May I suggest that the money that we have would be better spent first on upgrading the lines that we have, and then, if necessary, on expanding capacity by putting down new lines next to the existing ones, thereby reducing the impact on the countryside et al? In particular, of course, we would like a bit more money to be spent down in Dorset, please.

Ms Ghani: I feel slightly nervous about answering my hon. Friend’s question, because I have failed to turn up at a number of events in his constituency, and I am worried about the reception that I shall have at my next meeting there.

Let me remind my hon. Friend that investment in the lines in his area is already taking place. This is not an either/or project: we need to continue to invest in our traditional rail network. He referred to events in the past. I was not here at that time, but my job as a Minister is to ensure that we make the right decisions for the future. The impact that this project will have on our communities and on growth means that it is a very good project for us to support.
Northern Ireland: Political Process

5.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about the political process in Northern Ireland.

Last week, I came to the House and delivered a statement in the aftermath of the sickening attack that led to the death of Lyra McKee. The following day, both the Prime Minister and I attended her funeral at St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast, along with political leaders from across Northern Ireland and Ireland and from across the House. As many Members will know, it was an incredibly emotional and touching event, where I heard moving and powerful testimonies from Lyra's family and members of the community.

That was a day on which to grieve, and a day on which to reflect on a brilliant young life that was cut down by terrorism. All of us heard a clear message that day, from inside the cathedral, from the powerful testimony of Father Martin Magill, from the streets of Creggan and Londonderry, and from Northern Ireland's political leaders: no more violence, no more division, and no more delay. Northern Ireland’s political leaders must come together now. They must work together to stand firm against those who oppose peace and the political process, and work to build a genuinely shared future for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Lyra symbolised the new Northern Ireland, and her tragic death cannot be in vain. All of us must take inspiration from what she achieved in her life, and work even harder to make Northern Ireland a brighter, more peaceful and prosperous place for everyone. As Secretary of State, I have always made it clear that my absolute priority is to see the restoration of all the political institutions established by the Belfast agreement. That agreement has formed the bedrock of peace and progress in Northern Ireland since it was reached just over 21 years ago. It must be upheld, and it must be defended from those who would seek to undermine it.

Northern Ireland needs its political leaders to stand together and work with each other, now more than ever. That is why, in Belfast last Friday, I, together with the Tánaiste, called formal political talks to restore the Executive, commencing on 7 May. Those talks will involve the UK Government, the five Northern Ireland political parties that are eligible to form an Executive, and the Irish Government, on matters for which they have responsibilities. The talks will be conducted in full accordance with the Belfast agreement and the well established three-stranded approach to which this Government remain committed. There will also be a meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference on 8 May.

There is much to do, and many challenges ahead. It is incumbent on all of us to do all that we can to make these talks a success. Northern Ireland needs its Government back up and delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. From now until the start of talks, my team and I will be working with the parties on an intensive period of preparation for those talks. Both the UK and Irish Governments have been clear that we will do everything in our power to make these talks a success, but we cannot do it alone. No Government can impose an agreement from the outside. We need Northern Ireland’s political leadership to do everything they can to ensure that we emerge with an agreement to restore the Executive and build a better future for the people of Northern Ireland. We have a narrow window in which genuine progress can be made and we must act now.

I hope all Members of this House will appreciate that, to give these talks the best chance of success, there is a responsibility on all of us to give parties some time and some space to talk. While I will of course seek to keep this House updated, I will not provide a running commentary on negotiations. What I will be doing is everything I can to give these talks the best possible chance of success. I know all of us in this House and in the other place want to see these talks succeed.

This week has been a difficult time for us all. The murder of Lyra McKee was an attack not just on Lyra or our police service; it was an attack on all of us. Since that sickening attack in Derry, Northern Ireland's political leaders have shown great leadership in standing up together to reject violence, but it is now time for us to go further. The best possible way of showing those who oppose peace and democracy is to show that their efforts are futile and for all the political institutions of the Belfast agreement to be fully restored and functioning, as was intended by those who reached that historic agreement 21 years ago.

The stability and safety provided by the agreement have allowed Northern Ireland to thrive. Northern Ireland is now a leading destination for inward investment. Unemployment is at a record low and employment at a record high. Northern Ireland needs a devolved Government to allow for local decision making, to continue to strengthen the economy and to build a united and prosperous community. I will be doing all I can to make that happen, and I commend this statement to the House.

5.53 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): In thanking the Secretary of State for advance notice of the statement, may I also firmly welcome the spirit of that statement? She finished by talking about the things that are happening very positively in Northern Ireland, and she is right to do that. The tragedy of Lyra McKee's murder is that, once again, Northern Ireland is in the news globally for tragedy, not for the things that we want to hear.

Father Martin Magill commended political leaders for standing together in the Creggan on Good Friday, but he went on to say these words, which echoed around the world:

“Why in God's name does it take the death of a 29-year-old woman with her whole life in front of her to get us to this point?”

Those words echoed around the world; they struck a very strong chord. We must recognise that they struck a strong chord not simply with the congregation in St Anne's cathedral, but with people across Northern Ireland. We have to recognise that the politics of relying on the shrinking and narrow base for different political parties in Northern Ireland will lead, and has led, nowhere.

What united the congregation in St Anne's was the common understanding of the outrage of Lyra McKee's murder, and the hope that something better had to emerge from that process. Father Magill quoted one of Lyra's friends, telling us that she or he—I am not sure—said of the younger generation:

“They need jobs... They need a life, not a gun put in their hands.”
So let us work together to take away the temptation of the gun and replace it with education, training and those very jobs which can transform people’s lives. That is the stark challenge—the Secretary of State is right—to the Northern Ireland political parties, and, in particular, I have to say, to the leaders of the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin. They have to choose: do they want the politics of division or will they build the politics of unity of purpose and the politics of change?

Let me also turn to the position of the Governments in London and in Dublin. It was genuinely good to see the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in Belfast last week. It was good to see the Secretary of State herself and the Tanaiste. It is good that the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which was, frankly, so long in abeyance or even abandoned, has now met a couple of times—the Secretary of State announced today its next meeting—but nobody believes that either Government have been sufficiently engaged or energetic in the search for the return of Stormont government. That has now to change. Each Government have to be seized with the import of Northern Ireland and the need for power sharing.

I also have to say to the Secretary of State something I have raised with her before: we have not seen the Prime Minister engaged in this process, and cynics in Northern Ireland—this is important—say to me that Downing Street’s main interest in Northern Ireland has been the 10 votes of the DUP Members of Parliament that have now met a couple of times—the Secretary of State announced today its next meeting—but nobody believes that either Government have been sufficiently engaged or energetic in the search for the return of Stormont government. That has now to change. Each Government have to be seized with the import of Northern Ireland and the need for power sharing.

I also have to say to the Secretary of State something I have raised with her before: we have not seen the Prime Minister engaged in this process, and cynics in Northern Ireland—this is important—say to me that Downing Street’s main interest in Northern Ireland has been the 10 votes of the DUP Members of Parliament that have now met a couple of times—the Secretary of State announced today its next meeting—but nobody believes that either Government have been sufficiently engaged or energetic in the search for the return of Stormont government. That has now to change. Each Government have to be seized with the import of Northern Ireland and the need for power sharing.

Every Opposition Member of Parliament—I know I speak for them all, in Wales, in Scotland and in England—will support the Secretary of State in bringing these talks to a legitimate conclusion. I commit the Labour party and myself to working with her, where that is appropriate, to bring about that end, but I have to add a note of caution: yes, we want to see the Stormont Executive and the Stormont Assembly back in operation, but that is not enough. Any vision—there are conflicting visions, I know, of the medium and long-term future of Northern Ireland—must have power sharing and devolved government at its core. We cannot any longer have a stop-go Stormont. This time it must endure.

Father Magill’s powerful words were heard around the world, but what perhaps people did not see, from those in the cathedral that day who loved Lyra, were some looks of anger—of contempt—as they looked across at the politicians on the pews where the Secretary of State and I sat. We need to think about that, because the tragedy of Lyra’s death has given a new impetus for the need for action. Let us not have a future in which people look back with that same anger and contempt because politics has once again failed. Let us build a future where the politics of division is replaced by the politics of unity of purpose, the politics of change and the politics of hope.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his offer of support from all sides of the House in this process. This is not going to be easy—I am realistic about the challenges we face—and it is going to need absolute determination from everybody in this House to help the parties, and to help the leaders of those parties, to do what will be difficult, because there will be difficult accommodations that need to be reached for power sharing to be restored.

However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is no alternative for the people of Northern Ireland to fully devolved inclusive power sharing. That is the way those difficult decisions were taken in 1998 by politicians who made sacrifices personally. The people of Northern Ireland backed the proposals in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement wholeheartedly and overwhelmingly in a referendum, but did so knowing that they were not getting everything they wanted. They were having to give in certain areas, and that was difficult. We cannot let those sacrifices and the leadership that was shown 21 years ago go to waste. We have to see fully inclusive devolved power sharing in Stormont.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of points, and I will address as many of them as I can. He talked about Northern Ireland being in the news for all the wrong reasons. He and I have had a number of conversations in the past few days, and he knows that I share that view. That beautiful, dynamic and energetic part of the world is too often ignored until something like the tragedy of the death of Lyra McKee happens, and that should not be the case. We want Northern Ireland to be in the news and celebrated for all the right reasons. I take him back to the comments of Councillor John Boyle, the mayor of Derry and Strabane, who knew Lyra personally—he was one of her tutors. He said that she had always wanted her name in lights, but not for this reason. I think we can all agree with that. He is right to say that the words we heard in the cathedral were echoed around the world, and that they showed a real common understanding of the outrage.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point about young people needing a life, not having a gun put in their hands. They need jobs and prosperity. It is not enough to say that unemployment is at a record low and that employment is at an all-time high; we need to keep building on that. We need more investment, and I am working hard to deliver a city deal for Derry and Strabane. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I met to talk about that on Friday, and we need to deliver it. The city deal for Belfast has already been delivered, and the city deal for Derry and Strabane will provide important opportunities.

I have always said that I wanted to restart the talks, but it was realistic to say that they had to wait until after the local elections. I am sad that it has taken such a tragedy to persuade the political leaders to stand together, but I am hopeful and optimistic that we can build on that in the time we have ahead of us after the local elections, before we move into the next part of the year, when excuses could be used for not having talks. We need no more excuses. The time has come for talks, and we need them to start. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the resumption of the talks, but of course not the tragic circumstances that have led to them.
This morning, my Select Committee took evidence in Belfast on the renewable heat incentive, which, as the Secretary of State well knows, was the touchstone for the collapse of the Executive. Does she agree that it is important to resolve that fiasco? What part will the RHI play in the structure of the talks that she has announced today?

**Karen Bradley:** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee again for his support. He and I had private conversations over the weekend, and it is good to know that there is support from all parts of the House for the activities that we are starting. There will come a time when it is right to talk in this House about the process and structure of the talks and the matters that they deal with, as well as about the issue of an independent chair. I hope that the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) will forgive me for not addressing that point earlier. I am pragmatic about doing this in the way that has the best chance of success, and I am open to all suggestions and thoughts on that matter, but today is the time to show our encouragement to the political leaders in Northern Ireland and tell them that we want to see power sharing resolved. I will be working with the parties over the next few days, and I would be very happy to come to either the Select Committee or this Chamber when we are further into the process to talk about the structure of the talks and the matters that are being discussed.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of her statement. I share the horror of so many people about the death of Lyra McKee and the events that led up to it, and about the deaths and injuries inflicted on so many people that have had less attention. I really welcome the Government’s acknowledgement of the clear message of the ordinary people of Northern Ireland, as voiced so eloquently by Father Magill. That message calls for politics and peace, rather than violence and aggression. I say to the Secretary of State, however, that that clear message was being delivered long before recent violence; it has been a constant refrain in Northern Ireland. The people have been asking for this for many long years, but the politicians here and in Stormont have failed to heed those calls. We should of course recognise those who did not fail and who brought hope. Perhaps ironically, they were often old warhorses from opposing sides of the stand-off that was Northern Ireland politics for so long. We all want to see their successors match that achievement.

What are the Government doing to bring civic society into the talks? Surely the people of Northern Ireland who are not involved in party politics should be part of them. Further, will the UK Government make a commitment that nothing will be done, either in these talks or in other proceedings, that might call into question the Good Friday agreement, or the UK’s good faith in protecting it? Will the Government do whatever is necessary to avoid a hard border? Finally, the Secretary of State said that she would not give a running commentary, but while I appreciate the need for space for all the parties to discuss the issues, I must point out that that is almost exactly the wording used during the Brexit negotiations. It strikes me that, in that instance, we would have been in a better place had the Government done more sharing and listened to advice in this Chamber.

**Karen Bradley:** I welcome the hon. Lady back to speaking on matters regarding Northern Ireland. It is very nice to see her. I know that this is a temporary move, just for today, but it is nice to have her back. She is absolutely right to say that ordinary people have been giving us this message for a very long time; I have heard it time and again. When we brought forward the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill last October, we were clear that it was designed to give the parties space to enable them to come to the accommodation that is needed to get power sharing restored. I am as frustrated as anybody that we have not been able to get to this point before now, and it is a shame that it has taken something so tragic to focus minds, but I repeat what I said to the hon. Member for Rochdale: it has always been the intention that talks would resume after the local elections, and I see a real willingness from the political parties to do that.

The hon. Lady asked questions about the process and structure of the talks, and about civic society. I agree that there is clearly a role for the members of civic society who have done so much to hold things together in the absence of Ministers, but as I said to the Chair of the Select Committee, today is not the time to get into the formal structure of the talks. I will be happy to do that at the appropriate point, but the important thing today is to focus on getting the parties back round the table and getting agreement on the structure and framework of the talks.

The hon. Lady asked about the Government’s commitment to the Belfast agreement. I want to put it clearly on record that this Government are steadfast in their commitment to the agreement and its successors, and to all the institutions established by those agreements. She also asked about the hard border issue. We have made it clear, in the joint report in 2017 and in the withdrawal agreement, that we will not allow there to be a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The border in Northern Ireland is not just about the completion of customs dockets and the movement of goods; it is about how people feel and the emotional connection that people have with communities on the other side of the border that contain their families, their friends, their schoolmates and their colleagues. Those communities live side by side and do not see a border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We need to ensure that that continues.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): I wish the Secretary of State the best of luck with these talks. May I ask her what she meant when she said that we have a “narrow window in which genuine progress can be made”? Is she setting a deadline for an outcome from the talks, and if so, what will be the consequences if the talks fail? Might there be another election in Northern Ireland, or a move towards direct rule from here?

**Karen Bradley:** I can well understand why my hon. Friend is keen to ensure that contingency plans are in place, but I think that today is the day to look towards getting the talks started and the potential for them succeeding. I mentioned a narrow window because it is clear that, as for everything in Northern Ireland, there are events in the calendar that make it harder for the parties to come together. One such event is the local elections on Thursday; it is harder for parties to talk to each other and work together when they are out on the doorstep campaigning against each other. Once we have
got through the local elections, we will have an opportunity for the parties to come together, and I want to use that opportunity.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, and particularly the reference to giving the talks the best possible chance of success. She will remember our discussions on Friday, so does she agree that the talks would be enhanced considerably if all parties, including Sinn Féin, dropped any preconditions and entered the talks with an openness of spirit, endeavouring to try to reach an agreement whereby we all win, instead of it being a win for Sinn Féin and its republican agenda?

Karen Bradley: It was an honour to be invited to the Unity of Purpose group, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member, in Londonderry on Friday. We are trying to organise a visit with the hon. Member for Rochdale as well. It was great to see politicians and members of civic society from all parts of the community in Londonderry sitting around a table and discussing what is right for the people of Derry/Londonderry, so I am determined to revisit with the hon. Gentleman. We can see from that group that it is entirely possible for politicians from opposing parties and from different parts of the community to work together, and that is what we need to see in Stormont.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I understand that one of Sinn Féin’s preconditions is that the talks allow for Irish Gaelic to become an official language in Northern Ireland, and be on the same level as English. What percentage of the people of Northern Ireland actually use Gaelic or Irish at home?

Karen Bradley: If my hon. and gallant Friend will forgive me, I do not have the exact percentage, but I am happy to write to him. As for the talks and what will happen, if he will forgive me, today is the day for showing our encouragement for the talks starting, and our support for their succeeding. I will be happy to come back to this House later to give a progress report—hopefully with good news for the people of Northern Ireland.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I wish the Secretary of State well. She has a difficult job. Will she look at the lessons that were learned from the establishment of the St Andrews agreement, which restored devolution last time? It was characterised by four key points. The first was prime ministerial and Taoiseach engagement consistently and intensively over a long period in a very short time, if that makes sense. In addition, all the parties, including the smaller ones, were clearly involved, and there was a clear deadline by which decisions had to be made on areas where there was disagreement. If there was no decision, those disagreements were exposed for further discussion with the people of Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman will have welcomed the fact that the first statement on the talks was a joint statement from the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach. We are looking carefully at all the successful talks processes of the past, and at those that perhaps were not so successful, to learn lessons and ensure the best chance of success this time.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. We all want peace and power sharing in Northern Ireland. Having served there three times on operational tours, I would certainly welcome that most warmly. When she speaks to the Prime Minister, can my right hon. Friend reassure me that she will encourage her not to bring the withdrawal deal back into this House for a fourth time with the backstop, because it threatens the integrity of the United Kingdom and, in doing so, Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I am obviously here today to talk about starting a talks process to restore devolution in Northern Ireland. Decisions about the withdrawal agreement and so on are probably above my pay grade at this point.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): For as long as there has been a peace process, my party has been part of a non-partisan approach to it in this House. In that spirit, may I offer my congratulations and welcome the news that the Secretary of State brings to the House today about the resumption of talks? It is not the case, however, that the whole political process in Northern Ireland has been failing in recent years. My sister party, the Alliance party, has come forward on several occasions with different initiatives, including the appointment of an independent mediator and a review of the petition of concern process. Will the Secretary of State assure me that its voice will be heard in this process, and that the sensible suggestions that it has brought to the table thus far will be given due prominence?

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support and assure him that it will be an inclusive five-party talks process. The suggestions, ideas and considerations that have been put forward by all parties will of course form part of the process. We want inclusive power sharing that comprises all five parties that are eligible to be part of the Executive.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will agree that the Good Friday agreement must be upheld in Northern Ireland if peace is to be sustained and so that we do not have more murders like the tragic death of Lyra McKee. It is essential for progress in Northern Ireland that the Assembly returns. To give one brief example, the children’s food inquiry is going to report to Stormont tomorrow, but there is no one locally—no Minister or Executive—who can take that or any of the other matters forward for the people of Northern Ireland, who want to be able to continue to move forward and who want prosperity to be built on.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Lady. Lady that devolution needs to be restored. She cites one of many examples of why we need Ministers in Stormont taking executive decisions and directing civil servants, and I want to pay tribute to the civil servants, who have acted admirably in the absence of political direction for over two years. It is important that we continue to make the point that the people who murdered Lyra do not believe in the peace process or in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That is unlike people in this House and this Government, who are steadfast in their commitment to the Belfast agreement. There is no excuse for what those people did. It was murder. They should not be doing it and
should not have done it. We need to stand up together across this House and across the community in Northern Ireland and say, “No more.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State not agree that the time has passed for talking shops and the time has come for the democratic process to get back into Stormont to debate, vote on and pass legislation? The Northern Ireland Assembly is the only mechanism for getting Northern Ireland back on its feet. There should be no more red lines. We need to get business done, and that can be achieved only by returning to Stormont the elected representatives who want to deliver what our people need: legislative change.

Karen Bradley: I agree that the time has come for politicians to get back to run the schools, hospitals and infrastructure projects and other matters that cross my desk day in, day out. People are crying out for those decisions to be taken. That is why it is so important that we show such resolve from this House to support those politicians, because it will be difficult. Challenging things need to be done and said over the next few weeks, and that will be hard, so we need to give the leaders, who have shown incredible strength and commitment already, the strength to get through the next few weeks.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman makes his point well. I meet civic society and other leaders in Northern Ireland on a regular basis, and the point was made to me at one of my meetings with church leaders that politicians—this is true for all of us—need to show restraint and respect. They need to respect the other point of view and they need to show restraint in what they are asking for, because the people of Northern Ireland just want and need to see their politicians making the decisions that they elected them to make. They do not want anything else. They just want their politicians to get on with it.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, and she knows we need to strive not just for an agreement to restore our devolved institutions but to do so in a way that commands support right across Northern Ireland. That means a balanced deal, a fair deal and one that everyone in Northern Ireland can look to as a progressive deal.

In doing that, and recognising that nothing can be delivered through these talks without a restored Assembly, will the Secretary of State keep open the prospect of re-establishing the Assembly as soon as possible and conducting a talks process in parallel, just as we did with the Hillsborough talks and the Stormont House talks?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman represents his constituency and his constituents incredibly well, and he is very attuned to the mood of the public. We have had a number of conversations in which he has expressed his frustration about the lack of an Executive and what it means for the people in his constituency, and in which he has spoken about matters he campaigns for passionately—he has been a leading campaigner on the Muckamore Abbey issue.

I want to see the Assembly restored, and it is for the politicians in Northern Ireland to do that. No Government can impose a political settlement on the politicians in Northern Ireland; it has to be an agreement between those politicians. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 enables the Executive to be reformed without further action being taken by this House, and I urge politicians to seize this moment. We have a small window, and the public are behind the political leaders and want to see them do the right thing. This is the moment for the political leaders to seize that opportunity, do the right thing and go back into government.

Mr Gregory Campbell: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just a few moments ago, in criticising—quite rightly, in the view of many, many people—the
actions of Saoradh, the political wing of murdering terrorists, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) made an oblique comparison between that group of murdering terrorists and others who walk on the streets such as the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys. That should not go unanswered, and it should be totally and utterly condemned by all right-thinking people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Gentleman makes his point. I understand why he wishes to raise a point of order on the matter, but he will appreciate that it is not the responsibility of the Chair. I am quite sure that any hon. Member in this House, in anything they have said, will have meant well.

Mr Sweeney: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for your forbearance.

For the record, it was not my intention in making that statement to conflate the motives of those organisations. I was merely reflecting my constituents’ concerns, as brought to me, about the intimidation, as they see it, that has taken place in the city of Glasgow. I was merely reflecting that. I was not conflating violent acts with anything else.

I abhor the actions of Saoradh, which are a different order of violence from anything that has taken place involving any other organisation in recent times. It was not my intention to cause that degree of offence. If it has been received in that way, I beg the forbearance of the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) as it was not my intention.

It is important that both sides understand each other if we want to reach a compromise—that was my intention in raising those concerns. I have had dialogue with both sides on this issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The hon. Gentleman has been most gracious in his response.

Jim Shannon rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will leave it at that.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (CITIZENS’ RIGHTS) BILL

Frank Field presented a Bill to safeguard rights of European Union citizens in the United Kingdom after exit day; to make provision for arrangements to be made with other European Economic Area countries and Switzerland to maintain the rights of British citizens in those countries after exit day; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 383).

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): If tomorrow is anything like today, I will get it all through.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): You may say that. I cannot possibly comment.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we will debate motions 1 to 4 together.

6.26 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I beg to move motion 1,

That the Chemical Weapons (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 618), which were laid before this House on 22 March, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this we shall consider the following:

Motion 2—Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Zimbabwe)—

That the Zimbabwe (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 604), which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved.

Motion 3—Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Republic of Belarus)—

That the Republic of Belarus (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 600), which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved.

Motion 4—Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Syria)—

That the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 792), which were laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.

Sir Alan Duncan: Right hon. and hon. Members will be well aware of the importance of sanctions, which are a key element of our approach to our most important international priorities. They help to defend our national interests, support our foreign policy and protect our national security. They also demonstrate our support for the rules-based international order.

The UK has been a leading contributor to the development of multilateral sanctions in recent years. We have been particularly influential in guiding the EU’s approach, which is why, when we transpose the EU sanctions regimes to the UK, we intend to carry over its policy effect. I will say more about that in a moment.

We are committed to maintaining our sanctions capabilities and leadership role after we leave the EU. Colleagues will recall that the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 provides the UK with the legal powers to impose, update and lift sanctions after we leave the EU. This was the first major legislative step in creating an independent UK sanctions framework.

However, although the Act sets out the framework needed to impose our own independent sanctions, we need statutory instruments to set out the detail of each sanctions regime within that framework. Such statutory instruments set out the purposes of our sanctions regimes, the criteria under which the Secretary of State may designate individuals and entities and the types of restrictive measures imposed. They do not specify which individuals or entities will be sanctioned. The Government will publish the list of those we are sanctioning under UK legislation when the prohibitions come into force. We will seek to transfer EU designations in each case, but those decisions will be subject to the legal tests set out in the Act. Any EU listings that do not meet the tests will not be implemented.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Although we will become “independent”, in that sense of the word, in relation to sanctions, how does the Minister propose to co-operate with other countries? Is there a mechanism for the Government to do that, so that we can control chemical weapons?

Sir Alan Duncan: If we leave the EU with a deal, there will be a period of transition in which we will retain our sanctions under the existing EU system. If we leave with no deal, which is what we are addressing today, we will need to trigger our autonomous right to have sanctions. Therefore, we need these statutory instruments. I am sure that in the event that we are not part of the EU, our leadership on sanctions and the fact that the City of London is such an important financial centre for money laundering—[Laughter.] For anti-money laundering. It will mean that we retain our pre-eminent role in influencing sanctions, as we have in the past.

The House may recall that review and reporting requirements were incorporated in the 2018 Act. We have therefore published alongside these statutory instruments a report on the purposes of each sanctions regime, and on the penalties contained within each instrument. Those reports are available in the Vote Office, should Members have an interest in them, and the Government will review each sanctions regime on a regular basis. I wish to thank the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments for its close and helpful scrutiny of so many statutory instruments relating to sanctions over recent months.

The four SIs under consideration are those that transfer into UK law the EU sanctions regimes on chemical weapons, Zimbabwe, Belarus and Syria. In each case, the instrument seeks to deliver substantially the same policy effects as the measures in the corresponding EU regime. Hon. Members will note that human rights are a significant focus of some of the sanctions regimes under consideration today. I know that many hon. Members are keen for the UK to develop our own stand-alone human rights sanctions regime under the 2018 Act and may therefore query why we are simply transferring existing EU sanctions regimes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Obviously the sanctions are there for the purpose of suggesting change, if that can be done, in Zimbabwe, Belarus, Syria and so on. I am conscious of the need to have human rights and a democratic process that actually works. Does the Minister feel that what we are doing now, alongside those who have worked within Europe in the past, will influence change in human rights, including sometimes the rights of those of religious belief?

Sir Alan Duncan: In general terms, the answer is yes, I very much hope so. That is what sanctions are designed to do. However, as the House will appreciate, we are today just looking at the framework within which specific sanctions regimes can fit, rather than at the actual sanctions regimes or indeed their efficacy and effect in the countries we are discussing. We are looking at a legal framework under these SIs: we are not really looking at the full operation of the sanctions that may form part of the framework we are setting up today.
I assure colleagues that the 2018 Act does indeed provide the necessary powers in UK law to allow us to develop our own regime. However, these SIs were laid on a contingent basis to provide for the continuation of sanctions should we leave the EU without a deal. As such, our priority has necessarily been to ensure the transfer of existing EU measures by laying SIs such as these. We will give consideration to new regimes as circumstances suggest and as parliamentary time allows. Approving these regulations would ensure that we have the necessary powers to impose sanctions in respect of Zimbabwe, Belarus and Syria, and in respect of the proliferation and use of chemical weapons, from the date of our EU exit. In the event of a deal, EU sanctions would continue to apply during the implementation period, and these instruments would not immediately be needed. As a member of the EU, or during the implementation period, EU sanctions will apply in the UK. We will look to use the powers provided by the 2018 Act to the fullest extent possible during this period, but there will be some limitations on the measures we can impose autonomously. I wish quickly to describe the purpose of each regime.

The chemical weapons sanctions regulations aim to deter the use and proliferation of chemical weapons, and encourage the effective implementation of the chemical weapons convention, by imposing immigration and financial sanctions on those involved in their use and proliferation.

The Zimbabwe sanctions regulations aim to encourage the Government of Zimbabwe to respect democratic principles, the rule of law and human rights, and to deter the repression of civil society. The regulations impose an arms embargo and other financial, immigration and trade restrictions, including on the trade in goods and technology that may be used for internal repression.

The Belarus sanctions regulations aim to address human rights abuses and threats to the rule of law, and to encourage the proper investigation and institution of criminal proceedings against those responsible for the disappearance of four individuals. The measures include an arms embargo, financial and immigration sanctions, and restrictions on goods or technology that may be used for internal repression.

The Syria sanctions regulations aim to deter the Syrian regime from actions, policies or activities that repress the civilian population, and to encourage a negotiated political settlement to end the conflict. The regulations include asset freezes and/or travel bans on designated persons, together with financial, sectoral and aircraft sanctions; and wide-ranging trade restrictions, including on goods and technology that may be used for internal repression and the interception and monitoring of telecommunications, but also in respect of other goods and technology, such as crude oil, jet fuel, luxury goods and items that can contribute to chemical and biological weapons.

These four SIs transfer into UK law well-established EU sanctions regimes that are in line with the UK’s foreign policy priorities. They encourage respect for human rights, the rule of law and security and stability in very difficult environments—

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am about to finish. If the hon. Gentleman would like to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, he may stand a chance of asking some questions, which I will answer at the end.

Approving these SIs will allow the UK to continue to implement sanctions from the moment we leave the EU, and it will send a strong signal of our intention to continue to play a leading role in the development and implementation of sanctions in the future. I commend them to the House.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): We do not intend to divide the House on these statutory instruments, because we believe that in the event of a no-deal Brexit it would be right to roll over these sanctions in their current form, which is what we are providing for. However, the papers before us include some detailed descriptions of the sanctions and explanatory memorandums setting out their purpose—what the SIs are intended to do and why—so I want to ask the Minister a couple of questions.

I will structure it in a slightly different way, because I think the order on the Order Paper is completely illogical, but I will begin by discussing chemical weapons.

The use of chemical weapons is prohibited, and the chemical weapons convention covering these sanctions is now 20 years old. In general, the convention has been a significant success, because 97% of the stockpiles of chemical weapons have been destroyed. However, we want to think about ways in which we can strengthen enforcement of the convention. Obviously, the sanctions are part of that enforcement mechanism. The current sanctions apply entirely to people from Syria or to Russians who have worked for the GRU—that is because of their involvement in the Salisbury incident. On the strengthening of enforcement, in addition to these and possible further sanctions, have the Government considered requesting challenge inspections, which are used if one country thinks another country has not been telling the truth about its stockpiles? It is possible to request such inspections through the UN Security Council. Given the fact that there is evidence of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, Malaysia, Indonesia—to which I shall come—and Great Britain, might the Government like to think about requesting challenge inspections?

I have a technical question for the Minister. According to Human Rights Watch, chemical weapons have been used 85 times in the Syria conflict. As I said, the sanctions relating to chemical weapons and Syria cover Russians and Syrians, but it is believed that Daesh has used some chemical weapons in Syria, and Daesh is currently not covered by the sanctions at all. Why is that, and what consideration have the Government given to the matter? Is it simply not necessary because Daesh is a proscribed terrorist group, or is there some other reason? Does the Minister anticipate changing the chemical weapons regime when we have an independent sanctions policy?

I am extremely concerned about allegations that white phosphorus was used in West Papua in December 2018. I have met a human rights defender who has a lot of detailed information about the allegation, which is extremely disappointing because the human rights situation in Indonesia has improved markedly over the past 20 years. The use of white phosphorus by the security services...
would obviously be a breach of the chemical weapons convention. If the Minister or his officials do not have the answer now, please could they write to me on the matter?

Let me turn to the statutory instrument on Syria. The current sanctions that the Minister proposes to roll over cover 277 individuals and 51 entities—he mentioned oil, luxury goods and so on. Will the Minister update the House on the effectiveness of the sanctions and on what other steps the Government are taking to reduce the terrible ongoing conflict in Syria? When and how does the Minister think a negotiated political solution with the consent of the Syrian people is going to be achieved?

I wish to draw the Minister’s attention to what seems to be a hole in the Syria sanctions. They are meant to cover members of President Assad’s close family and his close associates, but it has come to light that his niece has been living and studying in the UK for some time. She was able to gain entry to this country, to enrol on not just one but two university courses, and to fund her stay, all apparently without the authorities noticing. Many people will be extremely angry to hear about that. The immigration regulations in this country are now quite tight, and people often come to Members when they are about to be thrown out by the Border Agency, yet the niece of President Assad, one of the most serious serial human rights abusers, who has used chemical weapons against his own people, has been allowed to live peacefully and happily in this country and to secure her education here. That cannot be right. What does the Minister think about it and what is he going to do about it?

Let me turn to Belarus, as there are obviously connections between the sanctions against Russians and the Belarus sanctions. In respect of human rights in Europe, Belarus is currently in the deep freeze, but the sanctions are quite narrow, covering only four people. Does the Minister think the sanctions are proving to be effective in affecting the behaviour of the Belarus Government? As he said, evidence of human rights violations in Belarus continues to come in. In 2016, the EU decided to lift sanctions against 170 people, but the ongoing human rights situation in Belarus is extremely serious. The Minister said that the sanctions were related only to the disappearance of four individuals; why were those four particular episodes the ones on which the Government and the European Union alighted in respect of their sanctions policy? I am pleased that, being the Minister for Europe, the Minister knows a lot about Belarus and will be able to tell the House what is going on. Does he give any credibility at all to Moscow’s proposal for the unification of Russia and Belarus?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Lady goes any further, she and the House will appreciate that the matter we are debating is of Russia and Belarus?

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. There has been a brutal crackdown on protests, with 2,354 violations of human rights, including 17 deaths and 17 rapes. I hope that the Minister will take that into account and tell us what precisely the Government will do to achieve change. I also want to know whether the Government’s policy on sanctions is being co-ordinated with the policy being run by the Department for International Development to tackle the drought. Obviously, one of the problems with sanctions is that, when we have sanctions against a country, delivering aid can sometimes be quite tricky, as knowing which transactions can pass through and which cannot be complicated.

I do not know whether, as well as discussing the sanctions with the European Union, the Minister has been co-ordinating with the African Union. The current position is that Zimbabwe will not be allowed to rejoin the Commonwealth until it improves its human rights record, but will the Minister please tell us the co-ordination mechanism with the African Union?

That brings me to my final general point, which I also raised in our last debate on sanctions. How will we co-ordinate with the European Union after we have left? Everybody in this House fully understands that just one country’s sanctions cannot be effective. This only works when we have co-ordination internationally. Sometimes that co-ordination is at the UN level and sometimes, as in the case of these regimes, it is at the European level, but the Minister has not yet been able to tell us what co-ordination mechanisms the Government are planning post Brexit. It would be interesting to know from him what he envisages, both in the scenario of leaving with a deal and in the case of leaving without a deal.

6.51 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I need to duck out immediately after my speech, as I have explained to the Whip on duty. I intend to return, I hope in time for the wind-ups. Forgive me for leaving immediately after a speech, which I rarely do.

I want to speak briefly to emphasise the importance of the roll-over of these sanctions, in particular in relation to Syria, an area I know something about, and
the prohibition of chemical weapons. Sanctions are an international symbol, and they are important not only as regards the individuals designated, but as a sign of international concern about breaches of international law. We live in a fragile world. It is made up of different blocs that have created a post-war consensus, and a series of rules and regulations that have held the world in check, including in some very difficult areas.

I agree with the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) that the prohibition of chemical weapons measure has worked particularly well, as has the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. If it is breached—it has been broken in relation to Syria and in relation to the UK in recent times—we are all at risk. Ensuring that there is a sanctions regime is important in itself, and for the individuals concerned.

I am concerned about the risk of Syria becoming almost a forgotten conflict, because it is no longer on the front pages—and it needs to be. As some of us feared, there was a risk that interventions in Syria—not by the west, but by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah—would enable the regime to recover territory and effectively reach a position where the conflict was resolved to its benefit. As that has gone quiet, we have forgotten the indignities suffered by the Syrian people—the millions who have been displaced internally and the millions who have gone abroad. The sanctions regime is essential to keep that in people’s minds. Sanctions contain those who have been associated with a regime that has waged war and made chemical attacks on its own people.

There is a concern about so-called normalisation. There has to be a future for the countries that border Syria; we all understand that. Lebanon and Jordan in particular want to return refugees—of course they do—but there can be no normalisation with a regime that continues to treat its people as it does. We are aware that when refugees go back to recovered areas in Lebanon or Jordan, and speak to their families and say what is happening, they are interrogated. Young people are conscripted and taken away to potential battle areas. The same indignities that were heaped on people and the offences committed against them in the past take place again. There can be no normalisation in those circumstances. It would matter hugely to those who are watching every move, and who believe that there should be justice after the conflict, if sanctions were not rolled over, and if we were not able to take this sort of action in Syria.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My very good and right hon. Friend talks about sanctions and something happening. Under international law, what can happen to people who are named in one of these sanctions?

Alistair Burt: The sanctions have been imposed on a series of individuals connected with the regime. They affect their financial transactions. Many of them remain involved internationally; they want to make investments, to have money coming through, and to be able to conduct their business. Sanctions make that difficult. We know that around any regime there are the cronies who keep it in place through their use of money and assets. Sanctions make all that much more difficult.

That is different from the case of those who might be identified through another process as being guilty of crimes. There must be some sort of investigation into the crimes after the Syrian conflict comes to an end. Sanctions increase pressure on the regime to recognise that there can be no normalisation unless it follows the UN process, there is a political process, and there is political change in Syria that means that the people have an opportunity of a normal life after the conflict.

If the sanctions regime was not there—if the international community forgot about Syria—the situation would be so much worse, so I welcome the measures proposed by my right hon. Friend the Minister. In answer to the last point made by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, I believe that it will be possible to have a strong relationship with the European Union and other entities to ensure international co-operation on these sanctions. We are an island in one sense, but in another we are not. We need to make sure that we have the contacts and the abilities to ensure that we are part of an international sanctions regime to ensure maximum pressure on those who have caused harm and perpetuate a system that causes damage.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for bringing the measures forward, and to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland for her response, which ensures that there is consensus on this, as there must be. For the people of Syria, this will bring a welcome sense that they are not forgotten, and that there will be justice for the crimes committed against them.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): My comments will be relatively brief, but there are important issues to be discussed. This will certainly be part of ongoing discussions as the UK decides how to leave the EU. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), speaking from the Front Bench for the official Opposition, talked about that relationship and what would happen about the co-ordination of activities. We should not lose sight of that as developments take place, but it is entirely responsible to keep applying sanctions, particularly on chemical weapons and their use, and against proliferation, as the UK leaves the EU. It is important that we all use all our efforts to prevent the proliferation of these weapons and encourage the effective implementation of the convention on the prohibition of the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and on their final destruction.

On Zimbabwe, it is again entirely necessary for the UK to remain in support of, and to continue to apply, the sanctions put in place through the EU. We should always be ready to protect and promote human rights wherever they are denied, and these sanctions are very necessary in applying pressure to oppressive regimes, so that they improve their human rights record, whatever that may be.

The EU maintains a far-reaching and powerful sanctions regime, and we should be keen to align ourselves with our closest allies in the EU—even though the UK is leaving the EU very soon and will no longer be a member state. I am sure that there are parts of the UK that have other ambitions in that regard.

The UK is Belarus’s third biggest trading partner after Russia and Ukraine, and the second largest investor in the country. It is important that the UK continues its
actions on human rights and freedom of the press, and it is entirely necessary for pressure to be applied to keep a focus on human rights abuses.

In Syria, we have seen a regime that has used chemical weapons against its own people; 400,000 people have been killed there, and half of Syria’s population has been displaced. The EU imposed sanctions in 2011. As the Minister said, these sanctions include travel bans and asset freezing. We would expect sanctions to continue multilaterally to ensure that we work hand in glove with the EU, and our allies and partners. The Minister has mentioned co-ordination; I would like reassurance about the Government’s position in that regard.

It really is a huge disappointment that this is all about the UK Government taking a certain path while Scotland is dragged out of the EU against its will, and in contravention of the vote in Scotland, where people voted to remain in very large numbers. The UK has decided on its own path, which is why the Government are using parliamentary time now to unravel 40 years of co-operation across Europe, but they should not be surprised if Scotland takes her own path in the coming months and years. We perhaps see our future as the new 28th state of the EU, and I think it would be appropriate if Scotland was a direct replacement for the UK in that process. But whatever the outcome of any future referendum in Scotland, I hope that we can continue to work hand in glove, shoulder to shoulder, with other EU states to maintain the sanctions regime.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): It is a pleasure to hear that the importance of rolling over these sanctions is supported on both sides of this House. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) spoke with considerable knowledge and authority about the sanctions against Syria. I will concentrate on another of the three countries on whom this set of sanctions will be maintained: Belarus.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Belarus in this place, and last year led an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Minsk. Later this year, we will be inviting Belarus to pay a return visit and send a delegation to visit the UK. The explanatory memorandum to these sanctions regulations refers to the need for respect of “democratic principles and institutions” in Belarus; but one has to say that there is still some way to go. The Parliament in Minsk and the parliamentary institutions of Belarus are not quite as we would recognise in this country. Those who do sit in Parliament have been largely appointed by the President, and those who were not appointed directly have certainly been approved by the President in taking up their position. The President himself first took office in 1994. He has won several elections since then, usually by over 90% of the vote, and the bodies that have observed those elections—not least the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe—have raised considerable concerns about their validity.

Belarus is also undoubtedly still firmly within the Russian orbit, and one has to accept that its room for manoeuvre is severely limited by what the Kremlin allows. Having said that, there are some signs of progress. Belarus did not recognise the Russian occupation of South Ossetia, of Abkhazia or of Crimea, and there are signs that it wishes to edge away and that some progress is being made. It was for that reason that the IPU decided that it was worthwhile to send a delegation to encourage further steps of progress, and I pay tribute to the excellent ambassador in Minsk, who is pressing for reform while also seeking to ensure that we have relations with the Government and institutions of Belarus.

There are also economic opportunities in Belarus, as the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) pointed out. The UK is a considerable market for Belarus exports. I have to say that Belarus is a rather smaller market for UK exports, but nevertheless there is an opportunity there. However, when it comes to human rights, it is worth noting that Belarus is still, I think, the only country in Europe that institutes the death penalty. The number of people executed actually doubled last year—to four. Assurances that Belarus is seeking to have a moratorium on the imposition of the death penalty have been rather disapproved by its recent actions, and that too is a considerable stain on its record and prevents it from joining the Council of Europe among other things.

The explanatory memorandum for these sanctions names four individuals. The first three—Yury Zakharanka, Viktar Hanchar and Anatol Krasouski—were all opposition politicians who were previously quite close to President Lukashenko, but found themselves in opposition to him and then died in 1999. Some were abducted, and the courts have now ruled that they were almost certainly murdered. Quite exactly what happened, we still do not know.

The fourth individual named on the explanatory memorandum and the regulations is Dzmitry Zavadski, and I mention him specifically because although he was President Lukashenko’s personal cameraman, he also practised widely as a journalist. As the Minister and others may know, I am a very strong supporter of media freedom. I strongly welcome the initiative that the Foreign Secretary has taken to make media freedom a priority of this Government to the extent of organising an international conference on it in July. The IPU, which I have the honour to chair, will be following that up.

The death of Mr Zavadski is a terrible blot, but it is worth mentioning another individual who worked alongside him—Pavel Shremet. Pavel Shremet was another Belarusian journalist who fell out with the President. He was also a critic of President Putin and a great friend of Boris Nemtsov in Russia. He was assassinated in a car bomb in Kiev in 2016, and his murder is another example of the risks that journalists take and how they sometimes pay a price with their lives. We should always raise the issue of Pavel Shremet. Quite who was responsible for his death is unclear—he made a number of enemies among people who could well have been responsible—but he was a Belarusian journalist. He was also one of the founders of Charter 97, which is a human rights organisation that operates in Belarus. I met representatives of Charter 97 just a few weeks ago. Its founder was also killed, the editor-in-chief fled and is now in Poland, and access to its website is blocked in Belarus.

The record in Belarus is not good. I therefore certainly would not argue that sanctions should necessarily be lifted. However, I would say that we should keep them under review and that we should encourage where there are signs of progress. I hope that there is some movement
towards greater liberalisation and away from the alliance with Russia. On that subject, I will not bore the Minister by repeating what has come up regularly in these debates but merely say that the sanctions against Russia remain of huge importance. We await the Government’s announcement of the implementation of the Magnitsky sanctions following the passage of the necessary legislation in this House. If ever we needed an example of why those sanctions against Russia remain of huge importance, it was the Minister’s excellent response to the debate that we had last week on the Russian annexation of Crimea. He will know that within hours of that, the Russians announced that they were going to make passports available to people living in Donbas. I am very pleased that the Foreign Office made clear our condemnation of that further provocation by Russia against the people and Government of Ukraine.

I strongly support these sanctions. However, I was keen to take this opportunity to put it on the record that although the sanctions against Belarus are justified, there are nevertheless small signs of progress.

7.10 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). He referred to the fact that the explanatory memorandum on the sanctions on Belarus does include the names of individuals, whereas, in contrast, the explanatory memorandums on Zimbabwe and on Syria specifically say that they do not. Clearly, there may be reasons for that in terms of individuals being able to know that they were on lists, but perhaps the Minister—if he is listening—will be able to respond to my point to clarify exactly why Belarus is being treated differently from Syria and Zimbabwe.

We are once again debating in this House matters that are probably a complete waste of our time, because everybody knows that there is not going to be a no-deal Brexit and that it may even be, hopefully, that we will not have Brexit at all. It is a bit like Alice in Wonderland: we keep coming back to having the same old discussions about things that probably will not happen. Nevertheless, we have to do it, so I will briefly refer to some of the issues that have been touched on.

The chemical weapons sanctions are extremely important, but we have to be honest about this. The chemical weapons convention is about 20 years old. I was involved in the debates in the House at that time. In fact, I had an Adjournment debate urging the Government to ratify the convention. I can recall how important those discussions were. However, we know that countries lie and cheat. The Assad regime in Syria was a signatory to the convention. It apparently had no chemical weapons whatsoever. Then suddenly, after the use of chemical weapons and the threat of military action by the Obama Administration in 2013, the Russians were able to make arrangements to remove massive stockpiles of the chemical weapons that the Syrian regime apparently did not have. Subsequently, it has become clear that the apparent removal of all of Syria’s chemical weapons has not been the case, because, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) mentioned, there has been documented use of chemical weapons—I think she said 86 times—within Syria. The overwhelming majority of those occasions have been related to use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, so we know that the convention—and therefore the sanctions that relate to it and compliance with it—has not been totally effective.

We need to revisit these issues internationally and to have more robust measures. Some of the robust measures that we can take are against designated individuals. There is a connection between the chemical weapons use in Syria and the chemical weapons convention. Mention was previously made of individuals living in this country who are acting as conduits, or bankers, for the Assad regime, either through family connections or through corrupt connections of another kind. We all know from the series “McMafia” that people in accountancy and law firms in our capital city are facilitating the way in which people get round sanctions. Last year, the Foreign Affairs Committee produced a very good report called “Moscow’s Gold” that detailed how Russia had a malign role within the City of London and elsewhere.

Clearly, Russia-friendly regimes such as those in Syria, Belarus and other places can use various mechanisms to get round financial sanctions. Whether it is done through London, from offshore British overseas territories or via other jurisdictions, we need to be more vigilant on these issues. Although the European Union plays a very important role, we also have to recognise that this is a global issue. It is not sufficient for us to act in a European context; we also need the United States, and other countries, to come together to make sure that there is vigorous enforcement of the sanctions regime.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point about the need for global co-operation on this. Does he believe that the UK should be taking a leading role in the UN, as it does, to make sure that there is true global co-operation to apply sanctions in multinational blocs but also to make sure that they are enforced, and that we co-operate to encourage as much good behaviour as possible?

Mike Gapes: Yes. I have been in discussions with people within the UN system who deal with the issue of terrorist financing, for example. UK officials, former or current, have always played an important role in that system. I pay tribute to the role of our people within the UN system. We need to work globally, but we also need to continue to strengthen the European Union’s sanctions regime for however long we remain members.

The sanctions regime in Zimbabwe was brought in against the Mugabe regime. There were a number of occasions when high-profile individuals were still able to attend international meetings. These were designated meetings in Brussels or in other European capitals that even Mugabe himself was able to attend. Our hope, with the democratic change in Zimbabwe, was that there would be a normalisation of politics in Zimbabwe and that sanctions would then be lifted to help the economic and social development of that country, which has suffered so much under the brutal dictatorship that it has had. Sadly, Zimbabwe is not making the progress that was hoped for. However, I am not sure whether the current sanctions regime is actually the best way forward to deal with the problems in Zimbabwe. We need to look at the possibility of trying to encourage a transition
that there is clearly public demand for. Zimbabwe is also, because of its geographical position, suffering from the impact of the cyclones that have hit Mozambique—they have also gone across into parts of Zimbabwe. I hope that the Minister can address that issue as well.

7.19 pm

Sir Alan Duncan: I would genuinely like to thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. Many have done so from a position of significant expertise and knowledge of the countries mentioned in the framework sanctions regime we are discussing.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am mindful of your stricture on the Order Paper, but inevitably some Members have been drawn into discussing the broader national issues around the framework law we are discussing. I am sure that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to comment on an individual such as the niece of President Assad.

Helen Goodman rose—

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady seems slightly indignant, and I am happy to give way.

Helen Goodman: Well, I am indignant. The convention in the House is surely that anything covered in an explanatory memorandum is reasonable to put to the Minister. I am extremely concerned that the niece of President Assad has been allowed to live and study in this country. Surely if the Minister looks at part 2 of the explanatory memorandum is reasonable to put to the Minister to answer those questions, but it must surely be in order.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am afraid that the hon. Lady's indignation is wrong on all counts. First, white phosphorus does not fall under the chemical weapons regime as it is a different sort of weapon, nor does Daesh, which falls under other regimes related to al-Qaeda and Daesh. I think it would be highly inappropriate for me to discuss an individual when we are looking at the framework within which the sort of designations the hon. Lady mentions can take place. These regulations put in place the law within which those designations can happen. We are not specifically looking at the designations themselves.

In respect of what we are able to transfer into the framework we are discussing, the sanctions relating to Belarus, for instance, were agreed in 2004. The EU sanctions regime currently imposes asset freezes and travel bans on four Belarus nationals with links to the Belarus Government who were implicated in the disappearance of two opposition politicians, a businessman and a journalist in 1999 and 2000. The hon. Lady also asked about changing the chemical weapons regime. We are mindful of our and others’ obligations under the chemical weapons convention and, through the regulations, we would have the flexibility to change sanctions should it be thought appropriate.

These regulations are necessary to enable the UK to implement our independent sanctions policy within the framework of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 from the moment we leave the EU. Approving the regulations would in no way prevent the development of an autonomous human rights sanctions regime. The sanctions Act enables sanctions to be imposed for a variety of purposes, including responding to or deterring gross violations of human rights, or otherwise promoting compliance with human rights law or to respect human rights.

Sanctions are an integral part of our response to the most important foreign policy challenges we face. We must be ready to deliver sanctions independently as soon as the UK leaves the EU, and that is why these statutory instruments are so important. Transposing EU sanctions regimes in this way puts the UK on a solid footing to continue to protect our interests, defend our values and maintain the position of leadership that we have built on sanctions over so many years. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Chemical Weapons (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 618), which were laid before this House on 22 March, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS) (ZIMBABWE)

Resolved,

That the Zimbabwe (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 604), which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved. —(Sir Alan Duncan.)

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS) (REPUBLIC OF BELARUS)

Resolved,

That the Republic of Belarus (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 600), which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved. —(Sir Alan Duncan.)

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS) (SYRIA)

Resolved,

That the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 792), which were laid before this House on 5 April, be approved. —(Sir Alan Duncan.)

INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENT

Resolved,

That Ian Blackford be removed from the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament under Schedule 1 to the Justice and Security Act 2013 and Stewart Hosie be appointed to that Committee under section 1 of that Act. —(Paul Maynard.)

Business without Debate

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Dan Carden be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Susan Elan Jones be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)
Private Tower Blocks: Removal of Cladding

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Matt Warman.]

7.26 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I have secured this debate to highlight the grave danger facing thousands of people living in privately owned high-rise blocks in my constituency—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot have leftover conversations from the last debate getting in the way of the hon. Lady’s speech. It is important that she is heard.

Rushanara Ali: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I secured this debate to highlight the grave danger facing thousands of people living in privately owned high-rise blocks in my constituency and up and down the country. I am referring, of course, to the presence of aluminium composite material—ACM—cladding on tower blocks that are owned by private companies, not council or housing associations. The danger is real and deeply worrying but can easily be alleviated if Ministers decide to take action. I hope that the Minister will today set out a firm plan of action with a clear set of deadlines to put the situation right.

It is unlikely that many of us would have been aware or known what ACM cladding was were it not for the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire. On the terrible night of 14 June 2017, 72 people lost their lives, and many more were injured, lost their homes and suffered a trauma that they are likely to carry with them for the rest of their lives. It was a trauma shared by the whole nation, which watched this needless tragedy.

It is clear that ACM cladding contributed to the speed with which the fire spread up and down the building, and to the loss of life. This was an avoidable, man-made disaster. Shockingly, the nation then discovered that this kind of cladding and similar flammable cladding is present on hundreds of blocks and other buildings around the country. In the immediate aftermath, Ministers promised swift action to replace ACM and other flammable materials on high-rise blocks, but instead, we have seen unacceptably slow progress, and 22 months later, 345 high-rise buildings with ACM panels have yet to be made safe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and congratulate her on securing a debate on this issue, which has elicited the emotion and interest of the House over a period. Does she agree that it is imperative that the cladding is removed quickly and that a Government-aided scheme would ensure that owners do the right thing and we see the prevention of another Grenfell tragedy? That has to be our goal. It is good to see the Minister in his place; we are all appreciative of him and look forward to his response. I add that the hon. Lady has another two and a half hours for her debate.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, and I very much hope that the Minister will say something concrete about legislation and about other steps that he and his Government will take to rectify this appalling problem.

This is deeply worrying for families living in those blocks, and is causing huge anxiety, fear and insecurity. Many of my constituents have raised serious concerns. One of them said that we are trapped with crippling fire warden charges and have an unsaleable flat. My wife is now taking anti-depressants."

The UK Cladding Action Group, established by residents in these unsafe blocks, has run a survey showing the impact on the mental health of these residents, and 88% stated that their mental health was worse than before. One resident said: "I feel as though I could burn alive at any minute. I live in constant fear, my physical and mental health has taken a huge impact. My financial situation is unbearable. I cannot sell my property or remortgage. I am stuck in a nightmare.”

Another said: "The massive £18,500 charge bestowed upon me is completely un-payable in my current financial situation. I have put everything on hold in the hope of a solution to present itself but currently nothing.”

Another said: "I was made redundant and can’t get a loan, can’t remortgage or sell my property. I feel trapped and the anxiety of this is affecting me getting another job”.

Another said: "The constant stress and worry has destroyed the relationship with my long term partner and as a result we have terminated our relationship. She could not handle living in a building that could kill us”

Another said: "The financial stress and feeling unsafe in my own home is taking a huge toll on our lives—we are also getting married in two months and this huge cladding bill has overridden everything. We want to move so we can start a family but are unable to as the flat is not sellable, and we can’t raise a family in such a flammable building.”

Others have listed many examples of struggle and trauma. One resident said: "My partner and I need to sell our property to buy a bigger place because I am pregnant and expecting our first child in 1 month. However, we have been unable to do this due to the cladding. This has caused immense amounts of anxiety and stress. We have also had to put our wedding plans on hold.”

Another said: "I can’t sleep very well. I think about my unsafe property daily. I can’t believe that I bought it in good faith, thinking I’d live in a safe and happy home. I’m stressed every day.”

Others have talked about their health issues. One resident said: "I suffer from an auto immune condition. Stress and working long hours can make the symptoms worse. This is a stressful situation as I feel I may not be able to sell/remortgage my property. And now I’m not only worried about my family’s safety, I’m worried about our financial security. So now I’m working harder than ever.”

Another said: "My boyfriend has moved to Italy without me as I cannot sell my flat… I have had to take a second job as I am unable to sell the property and release capital”.

Another of the residents said: "This has been the worst 21 months of my life. I am struggling to get through each day. Gone is the enjoyment of life.”

There are hundreds of these testimonies, and I have highlighted just some of the experiences of anxiety and fear, as well as devastation, that living in ACM-cladded properties has caused people up and down the country, as well as in my own constituency.
On 8 May, the UK Cladding Action Group will host a meeting to share its findings and concerns. I hope the Minister will be able to meet us at this very important meeting, and that Members from across the House will join the residents attending that meeting.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my hon. friend share my anxiety for the leaseholders who, even when the freeholder has done the right thing and removed the cladding, are left in negative equity, where the value of their flat is actually less than the bill hanging over their head for the removal of the cladding?

Rushanara Ali: Absolutely. I fully agree because the leaseholders bought the properties in good faith; they did not know that these blocks had ACM cladding. If anyone is responsible, it is the Government because the ACM cladding should never have been used—it was dangerous—and that is why it is important that the Government deal with this issue to protect people from this predicament.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): On that very point, a lot of the retrofitting that used this type of cladding was actually done to comply with EU regulations on the energy efficiency of those buildings. As a consequence, those involved fell through the loophole of having to obtain an energy efficiency certificate for a building to comply legally with the associated legislation without, unfortunately, the safeguard of putting on something that met all the fire regulations and compiled accordingly.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He has woven in the European perspective, but I would say to him that, fundamentally, the duty of care is with our Government—of whichever political colour—and there was nothing stopping the Government making sure that flammable cladding was not used, so to revert to blaming the EU is frankly unhelpful and not in the spirit of the purpose of this debate. This is about how we protect our citizens in this country, and how we learn from what has happened with the failure of regulation in our country to protect people in the future and deal with what is happening now for those who have dangerous cladding covering their blocks of flats.

Last summer, after vociferous campaigning, Ministers announced £400 million of funding for urgent fire safety repairs in social housing blocks that are at risk. This is welcome, but it did not come easy. The Grenfell survivors, having been through the most horrific trauma, campaigned with charities, local authorities and Members of Parliament. We had to fight tooth and nail to secure this funding, and it took a year. It should not have taken so long; the Government should have done it immediately. Now, we have to fight tooth and nail for a similar pledge for people to be protected in privately owned blocks. I hope the Minister will say something positive today about additional funding because this has gone on for two years, and it should not be like that.

Of the 345 buildings that I have mentioned are awaiting repairs, 226 are in private hands, and Ministers have done too little to make them safe. Of course, fire does not discriminate between private and public ownership. There is no logic in safeguarding social housing while ignoring private housing. Ministers have said that they expect private building owners to pay for these measures, although this has been backed only by an appeal to their good will and good nature, rather than stipulating it through legislation. The Government should make this a legal requirement.

Where repairs are being carried out, some private owners, as the Minister is fully aware, are passing on the costs to the people living in the flats as a service charge under the terms of their leases. This can amount to thousands of pounds, and it is simply unacceptable. As we know, freeholders who own these blocks are often in the shadows, obscured by front companies, and under data protection laws they can remain anonymous because of the risk of arson. If there is no law to compel freeholders and no public scrutiny, it is hardly surprising that many will fail to act.

In January, the Minister said that he could guarantee that people in high-rise flats with ACM cladding were safe to sleep at night, but thousands living in flats in high-rise buildings, encased in cladding that could spread fire with rapacious speed, do not feel safe and there is no good night’s sleep. The sleepless nights will continue until Ministers get a grip and move fast to take down the cladding.

My local authority, Tower Hamlets, is among those with the highest number of blocks with dangerous ACM cladding in the country: 41 are privately owned blocks, and nine are social housing blocks. Victoria Wharf in my constituency, which has been in the press, has ACM cladding like that at Grenfell. Residents have been charged nearly £7,000 per flat for temporary safety measures, such as 24-hour fire wardens. They are very concerned that no real action has been taken yet, despite the fact that the danger is well known. The freeholder is Vuillard Holdings, which is registered offshore.

Currently, there are no legal means of forcing the owners to meet their obligations—and if there are any, they are not affordable for my constituents. Perhaps the Government could take legal action against these companies if they are not prepared to legislate to make the companies pay. Time and again, when Ministers have heard the anguished cries of people in this situation, they have offered no solace. Indeed, the Minister for Housing told the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that he was “sorry to be opaque” when he was pressed on making funding available for private ACM-clad plots. I am sorry, too. This evening, instead of being opaque, I hope he will be transparent and demonstrate the urgency of the matter by announcing practical action backed by resources.

Specifically, I ask the Minister to address the following. Will his Department commit to creating new national funding for the removal of dangerous cladding from private blocks, administered by either national or local government? That would mean that works could start straight away. The funding must be additional, given the crisis in local government finance. Will he agree a series of deadlines along a clear timeline to remove all dangerous cladding? Will he amend existing legislation to force freeholders to pay for repairs?

I hope that we are about to hear an action plan about these important issues—making money available now, setting a timetable and making freeholders pay. In last year’s Budget, the Chancellor made £420 million of extra funding available to fix the faults. I get it wrong: fixing potholes is important—I tripped on one and had an injury—but the issue that we are debating is
[Rushanara Ali]
a matter of life and death for thousands of people up and down the country. For many in my constituency and the constituencies of Members across the House, urgent action is required.

After Grenfell, the Prime Minister said:
“My Government will do whatever it takes to...keep our people safe.”

Two years on, her Government have completely failed to honour that commitment, even when people are living in utter fear and despair for their and their family’s safety and are trapped in properties with no end in sight. In fact, I would go as far as to say that if one more fatality like those at Grenfell occurs in a block with ACM cladding because of this Government’s failure to act, this Government will be absolutely liable. They will have blood on their hands if they do not take action and if some other disaster happens.

7.43 pm
Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), my parliamentary neighbour, on securing this important debate and on representing the plight of her constituents so powerfully. It is a pleasure to follow her.

I am pleased that both the Minister for Housing and the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service have been listening to my hon. Friend’s presentation of her issues, and will be listening to the rest of us, who have an opportunity to contribute that was not entirely expected. I am grateful for the chance. There have been a number of opportunities to discuss this issue over recent months. On 9 April, I raised New Providence Wharf in my constituency, and the reluctance of the developer and freeholder, Ballymore, to conform to the Government’s expectation that it would cover the costs necessary for fire safety work for residents.

I gently remind the Minister for Housing, for whom I have the highest regard, as I have for the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, that I was promised a written update. I have yet to receive that correspondence. I would be grateful if he ensured that his office got that correspondence. I have yet to receive that correspondence. The campaign has three main aims: the Government should provide a fund to cover the cost of cladding removal and remedial works on private blocks—as they have, very positively, for the social sector; the Government should set out a firm timescale of no more than two years for the work to be carried out; and residents should be reimbursed for the interim fire safety costs incurred, and funding should be provided for necessary internal fire safety measures identified by a competent fire risk assessor. Will the Minister comment on that campaign?

Furthermore, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow mentioned in her introduction, the UK Cladding Action Group has conducted a mental, social and physical health survey to support its campaign. Its key findings are that nearly 65% of respondents said that, as a direct result of the ongoing situation, their mental health has been hugely affected. More than 85% stated that their mental health is worse now than it was before the ongoing situation. Almost 70% of live-in leaseholders said that they feel anxious and/or worried daily when they think of their future in relation to the ongoing situation. More than 90% of respondents said that they have money worries. Some 84% said they felt unsupported by the Government, and more than 60% said that they had worries about their family members’ safety. Is the Minister aware of this survey, and have the Government given a response?

Finally, the Association of British Insurers has supplied a briefing for this debate. It does not really cover the issue of Government funding for removal of defective material, but it does call for a renewed testing framework, for fire sprinklers for buildings above 18 metres or even 11 metres in height, and for more urgent reassessment of modern methods of construction and building regulations generally, as both Ministers on the Treasury Bench are aware.

This is more than an important issue; as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, it is critical to tens of thousands of our constituents. We are indebted to her for securing this debate, and for giving the Minister another opportunity to state the Government’s position. That position is supported across the House, but we want more developers to support what the Government expect them to support.

7.47 pm
Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing this really important debate. I remember the morning when I first saw the horrific scene of Grenfell on my television screen; I had been elected only a few days earlier. Those images—the horror of it—were very poignant to me and all of us here, I am sure.

The Government response has just not been good enough—not only the actions there and then, but what has since transpired. I was really horrified by what I saw then and what I have learned since. I do not want that lack of action and slow response to be replicated if such a thing happened again. If this had happened in the Minister’s backyard, or perhaps in a safe seat in south-east England, there might have been a very immediate response. I hope that the Minister will think about what will happen from now on to ensure that people living in high-rise buildings are safeguarded and looked after.

That is not what is happening in my constituency of Cardiff North, where I have a few high-rise buildings. The cladding on one of those buildings, Lydstep Flats, was tested shortly after Grenfell and was found to be in breach of fire and safety regulations. Of course, the cladding was immediately taken down, so that the residents could sleep comfortably in their beds at night. Since then, however, the mix of private and Cardiff Council
ownership has meant that there has not been adequate funding to replace the cladding, and the residents are now suffering day in, day out. That has nothing to do with the aesthetics of how the building looks; it is about what it is like to live there. I have visited those flats. There is damp and mould. Many of the flats are horrific. People are living in squalid conditions, and are suffering from mental and physical problems as a result.

One constituent came to me—I have since helped her to move flat—suffering from respiratory and mental health problems. She is really very concerned. Two fantastic local Labour councillors, Dilwar Ali and Jennifer Burke-Davies, have done their utmost to fight for the council to replace the cladding. The council is working very hard to find the funds, and a surveyor is looking at what the cladding needs to be, but there is no central funding from UK Government. We know how cash-strapped councils are. I believe it is for the UK Government to ensure that councils have adequate funding to replace cladding, so that my constituents in Lydstep Flats can sleep soundly at night, do not fear for their safety, and can be healthy, rather than fearful about their health.

7.52 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I commend the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this important debate. She has written to me on several occasions about this issue, and I congratulate her on her assiduous service to her constituents, as I do other hon. Members who have spoken in the debate.

I want to start by reassuring the House that I am well aware of the anxiety, fear and insecurity, as the hon. Lady put it, felt by many people living in blocks affected by this issue. Having met the UK Cladding Action Group, individuals and organisations from the Grenfell community and others, it is very clear to me that this event and its consequences have caused enormous distress—and there are also the practical issues that she rightly raised in relation to particular properties. I reassure her that much of my time, effort and commitment is spent trying to rectify this awful situation. Further to what the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) alleged about a possibly partial response, I gently point out that Grenfell Tower was in my London Assembly constituency. I served that community and the wider community for eight years. The idea that there would be any lack of commitment from my point of view is, frankly, for the birds.

Before addressing funding, I want to update the House on the wider remediation work under way. In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we established the building safety programme. A key objective of the programme has been to identify and remediate buildings with unsafe ACM cladding. We have collected data on over 6,000 private sector high-rise buildings, and we have identified 267 with unsafe cladding systems. There are plans and commitments in place to remediate 82% of those buildings. That includes buildings on which remediation has started or been completed. That progress is the result of action we have taken to put pressure on building owners and developers to reach a resolution.

In the private sector, we have been very clear that freeholders should do all they can to protect leaseholders from additional costs, by either funding remediation themselves or looking at alternative routes, such as insurance claims, warranties or legal action. The Secretary of State has written to all relevant building owners, setting out our strong expectation that leaseholders will be protected. He has asked them to find an acceptable solution urgently.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Minister is doing much good work on this issue. He is always very responsive; he exchanged text messages with me on this issue early on Saturday morning. He says he takes nothing off the table, in terms of getting freeholders or developers to pay for this work. He also says that long leaseholders should not be responsible either. Where we cannot find a freeholder or a developer to hold accountable for this work, long leaseholders will be left in limbo; their apartments will be unsellable, and they will live under unacceptable stress. Is it not right for the Government to step in with a central fund to carry out the remediation work, and worry about whether they can find the freeholder or developer afterwards?

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If he will bear with me, I will come on to some of those issues in my speech. If I have not addressed them by the end, he can by all means intervene on me again.

Owing to our continued pressure, following the Secretary of State writing to all building owners, there is a growing list of owners and developers who are agreeing to fund remediation. Leaseholders are currently protected from remediation costs in 83 out of 176 residential buildings. The growing list of owners and developers who have stepped in includes Barratt Developments, Mace Group, Legal & General, Peabody, Aberdeen Asset Management and Frasers Property. I am pleased to say that following regular engagement from the Secretary of State, me and senior officials, the building owners at Green Quarter in Manchester have now written to leaseholders to confirm that a fund has been established. This will ensure that leaseholders will not have to pay for the cost of remediating the ACM. We are very pleased at this outcome. I know residents feel strong relief that the uncertainty and anxiety over costs has come to an end.

We remain concerned, however, that some leaseholders are not yet protected from costs. They have found themselves in this difficult and stressful situation through no fault of their own, having bought their properties in good faith. I would like to assure Members that the Secretary of State and I, as well as senior officials, continue to press owners and developers of all high-rise buildings with unsafe ACM cladding to protect leaseholders from paying for this essential remedial work. Further to that, we have been engaged across Government to consider additional interventions, so that progress can be made more swiftly.

We also want to make sure that leaseholders can access independent initial advice. We have provided funding to the Leasehold Advisory Service, which provides a free, initial service to affected leaseholders. Its dedicated advice line and outreach helps leaseholders to understand their rights and the terms of their leases. The Leasehold Advisory Service has supported a number of affected leaseholders to understand the terms of their leases and the legal process for challenging a building owner if they attempt to pass costs on.
On the subject of pace, we are working with all relevant parties, including local authorities and building owners, to ensure remediation happens without unnecessary delay. Remediation does take time and it is important to get it right. The time to complete work varies considerably depending on factors such as structure, extent of cladding and existing fire safety systems. For many buildings, this is a complex job involving major construction work. I am aware that the removal of cladding in a number of buildings has revealed other defects and issues that have complicated matters and needed rectification.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Before he moves off the point about discussions across Government of what further measures they might be able to take, is he able to articulate what they are tonight or will he lay them out in due course to the House?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to press me, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I am not able to say tonight what specific measures are likely, but I am hopeful that we will be able to do so shortly.

We have worked closely with local authorities and fire and rescue services to ensure that interim safety measures are in place, so that residents are safe in their beds tonight. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow referred to my wanting reassurance that people are safe tonight. In fact, I have ordered a review of all those arrangements to take place as soon as possible, so that I can reassure myself that that is still the case.

Local authorities have the power to enforce these improvements if building owners do not take action. We are backing local authorities to take action where building owners refuse to remediate, including with financial support where it is necessary for the local authority to carry out emergency remedial work. Where financial support is made available, the relevant local authorities will attempt to recover the costs from the building owner.

Rushanara Ali: The Minister referred to “tonight”. Is he saying that every time we manage to get him into this Chamber he can reassure our constituents that they are safe for a night, or does he mean indefinitely, until the work is done? Will he explain how people can be protected against having to pay thousands of pounds towards the fire wardens, because that is happening to my constituents?

Kit Malthouse: As I have explained on numerous occasions, my primary concern, while waiting for the work to be undertaken, is to make sure that interim measures are in place in every affected building, so that people can be reassured that they are safe this evening and until that work is done. It is obviously the responsibility of building owners to make sure that their buildings are safe, but local fire and rescue services have been working closely alongside local authorities to make sure that certification is in place. I have asked for a review. I guess to satisfy myself that the measures taken over the last few months—whether waking watch or others—are still in place and are still assiduously adhered to.

I met someone recently who outlined that one measure that has been very reassuring for her has been the heat detectors in the rubbish chutes—often flashpoints for the start of fires—that alert the building control system that a fire may well be starting. We want to reassure ourselves that, across those buildings that have not yet been remediated, those interim measures are in place, to reassure people for the moment, while we wait for remediation. I acknowledge that this is not an ideal situation. We want to get the remediation done as quickly as possible.

However, whatever solution is found for these buildings, we have to recognise that these are often complex and difficult construction jobs involving enormous amounts of scaffolding, the procurement of alternative methods of cladding and finding the workforce and contractors to do the work. All of that may well necessarily take some time. However, as I said, local authorities have the power to enforce these improvements, and we have included a package of financial support where it is necessary and local authorities feel the need to step in. We intend to recover those costs from building owners if that is the case.

We established a joint inspection team to provide support to local authorities in ensuring, and where necessary enforcing, that remediation. We have strengthened the housing health and safety rating system and its operating guidance to provide specific guidance on the assessment of high-rise residential buildings with unsafe cladding. That should help local authorities to take action.

The Secretary of State and I also regularly chair a remediation taskforce to oversee progress. I take this opportunity to remind the House of the strong progress we have made in social sector remediation. The Government made £400 million available to social sector landlords to fund the remediation of unsafe aluminium composite material cladding on residential social housing buildings taller than 18 metres. We have so far allocated £259 million, and we are still accepting applications. Remediation has started or been completed in 85% of social sector buildings, and there are plans and commitments in place to remediate all remaining buildings.

I would also like to tell hon. Members about the work we are doing following the Hackitt review. Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we asked Dame Judith Hackitt to carry out an independent review of building regulations and fire safety. Dame Judith’s review found that the system was not fit for purpose. The review made 53 recommendations to establish a new regulatory framework and achieve a culture change to build and maintain safe buildings. The Government accepted the diagnosis of the independent review and published our implementation plan last December, which set out how we intend to take forward the review’s recommendations.

We committed in the implementation plan to consult on our proposals for a fundamental reform of the building safety system this spring, and we will publish our proposals shortly. Our aim is to put residents at the heart of a more effective system, with clear and more demanding accountability and responsibility for those who design, construct and manage buildings, alongside effective penalties for those who flout the system. We have not waited for legislation to begin to reform the system; we have already made progress. This includes launching consultations to make sure that standards
and guidance are clear, banning combustible cladding on new buildings taller than 18 metres and further restricting desktop studies. We are also launching calls for evidence around approved document B and the role that residents can play in keeping buildings safe. Much of the work to reform the building safety system will require primary legislation, which we have committed to introducing at the earliest opportunity.

We are also making sure that change begins on the ground as soon as possible through our joint regulators group, which is helping us to develop and pilot new approaches and to transition to a new, safer system. An industry early adopters group is trialling aspects of the proposed new regulatory framework in advance of legislation. Industry must also drive culture change by adopting a safety-first mindset and taking greater responsibility for building safety, and we will champion those that do the right thing.

The Grenfell Tower fire represents the greatest loss of life in a residential fire in a century. We must rebuild public trust in the system in tribute to those who lost their lives, the bereaved and the survivors.

**Rushanara Ali:** This update is helpful, but I bring the Minister back to the points made about resources for privately owned blocks, because that is where the big loophole is. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned the Government fronting the cost and then going after the people who are liable—the freeholders—to pay. So far the Government have not shown themselves to be on the side of residents caught in this trap, but that is what is needed; the Government need to fight for ordinary people stuck in this position. I would be grateful if the Minister could give me a substantive answer. To do otherwise would suggest the use of a delaying tactic, which is really unhelpful. Frankly, our constituents will not sleep comfortably tonight or any night if it carries on like this.

**Kit Malthouse:** I do not seek to use any kind of delaying tactic. I cannot give the hon. Lady a specific answer tonight, but I can say, as I said earlier, that conversations are ongoing across Government about what further interventions we can make, because we recognise that the issue needs to be resolved as urgently as possible. In the social sector we are making good progress. In the private sector, progress is slower; I absolutely admit that. We need to do something to speed that up, and we hope to increase the pace quite soon. Discussions are ongoing.

However, I point out that we have said to local authorities that, where they go into a building and assess there to be a category 1 hazard, we will support them to step in and do the work themselves. We have said specifically that we will provide financial support for that to happen. We have amended the HHSRS tool to take into account and appreciate the envelope of a building, not just houses that are internal. The tools are there for local authorities to step in and take action where they believe there to be an imminent threat to life.

Alongside that, as I say, we have commissioned a wider review to make sure that the measures required to keep people safe on an interim basis are assiduously applied and monitored while we try to sort out the remainder—the tail end—of this unfortunate problem. It has been a difficult and complex landscape—both legally and practically—with which we have had to wrestle, and I hope that we will reach a resolution soon. Pleasedly, as I say, the vast majority of large developers in the industry are stepping forward to play their part, which we should welcome.

**Rushanara Ali rose—**

**Kit Malthouse:** Given the seriousness of the debate, I will give way again.

**Rushanara Ali:** Can I ask the Minister once again about the timeframe he has in mind to get a grip on the outstanding issues, particularly with those companies that are not co-operating? Would he consider legislative action—or whatever action the Government can apply—to make them comply? Without the forcefulness of his Department and the entire Government, we are at risk of creating further danger to people’s lives.

**Kit Malthouse:** The hon. Lady should be under no illusion as to the amount of effort, time and commitment we are putting in to resolve this issue. There are meetings, both individual and collective, with companies and residents, and we are very close to the local authority and the community, who are also working hard, alongside us, to reach a resolution. I cannot give her a specific timeframe, but my desire is to get this finished and done as quickly as possible. I have seen the pain and anguish on the faces of people affected—it is very affecting to meet them and to understand what they are living with—and while I fortunately do not live in one of those buildings, it is not hard to put oneself in the position, in particular, of people whose home was their pride and joy and who had made a huge financial commitment. As I say, we are working as hard as we can to get that sorted out.

On that note, I thank hon. Members who have participated in the debate and reassure the House that we take this matter extremely seriously and are applying enormous resources to reach a resolution for all affected residents. Critically, we are determined to learn the lessons of the Grenfell tragedy and to ensure that nothing like it can ever happen again.

**Question put and agreed to.**

8.10 pm

*House adjourned.*
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): First, I would like to update the House: unfortunately, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth will be unable to join us this morning due to a family illness.

Our young people provide an invaluable contribution to the UK economy—they are more than twice as likely to be entrepreneurs as their peers in France and Germany—and we are supporting them. The start-up loans programme has provided over £60 million in loans to 18 to 24-year-olds since 2012. To further realise young entrepreneurs’ potential, I have asked the Prince’s Trust to lead a review to identify the barriers that they face.

Sir David Amess: In 2017-18, recent graduates from the University of East Anglia set up 247 start-ups employing 1,015 people. Will my hon. Friend reassure me that the Government will continue to fund these schemes, as they mean so much to young people and help to create a vibrant economy?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Through our industrial strategy, we recognise the valuable contribution from the creation of spin-offs and start-ups by businesses from university. That is why we have committed to increasing higher education innovation funding from £160 million to £250 million per year by 2020-21. This will help to increase universities’ capacity to engage in commercialisation and work with business.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that recent research from Sheffield University and King’s College London shows that young entrepreneurs face a very bleak future? In particular, the impact of leaving the EU on many of the very constituents who voted leave is a drop of between 17% and 20% in GDP. That is ruinous for so many of our industrial towns. What is she going to do about it?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, but it is true that young people in the UK are twice as likely to be entrepreneurs as those in France and Germany. Our percentages for young entrepreneurs are significantly higher. We are committed to our industrial strategy. I have asked the Prince’s Trust to undertake the review so that we understand specifically what the barriers are for young people and come up with a package to be able to help them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on her inspired decision to appoint the Prince’s Trust, which is a wonderful organisation that does magnificent work. Will it concentrate on 18 to 30-year-olds, and when is she expecting it to report?

Kelly Tolhurst: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to highlight some of the details of the youth entrepreneurship review. It has started and the board will be announced shortly. It will be looking at 18 to 30-year-olds, and we are hoping that it will report in the autumn. He is absolutely correct: the Prince’s Trust does amazing work with young people from all types of background. In fact, there is already a programme with the Prince’s Trust and Innovate UK that provides mentoring to young people and makes available loans of up to £5,000.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Scottish Government’s 2018-19 Budget means that 90% of firms in Scotland pay lower rates than they would if they were based elsewhere in the UK. Given that 55% of individuals will pay less tax than they would in the rest of the UK, what lessons do the Government plan to take in terms of supporting Scotland’s young entrepreneurs and those elsewhere in the UK?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman highlights specific differences within Scotland, but we are interested in making sure that young people are able to follow their dreams and aspirations whichever part of the country they happen to be in. We are announcing the young entrepreneurs review so that we can look at all the different barriers, including access to finance—something that the Government and I, as the small business Minister, take very seriously—and make sure that we create the right environment for our small businesses to start up, thrive and grow.

Small Businesses

2. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps he is taking to support small businesses.  [910591]

10. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support small businesses.  [910600]
£5.9 billion of finance to over 82,000 small businesses across the UK. We have also just announced an additional £200 million for innovation for British business.

**Theresa Villiers:** What discussions has the Minister had with landlords running small businesses about the proposed abolition of section 21 notices? We all want to help renters, but we need to take care that we do not pass new laws that might actually make it harder for vulnerable people to get rented accommodation.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. We want both to encourage good landlords to stay in the sector and to make sure that proposals do not impact on supply. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will be consulting landlords and looking at similar changes in Scotland. However, I reassure her that we recognise that small landlords, or incidental landlords, may have different requirements and they will therefore be very much part of the consultation.

**Sir Henry Bellingham:** Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to Snap-on UK Holdings in King’s Lynn in my constituency? It now employs 141 people and has recently won two Queen’s awards for enterprise and international trade. It is currently exporting to France, Poland, Italy and Spain, and it is trying to open up markets in Asia and Africa. What can she do to encourage other businesses in the country to follow Snap-on’s example and boost their exports, boost our economy and create jobs?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the excellent work of Snap-on UK Holdings, which has won a Queen’s award for enterprise. Businesses in North West Norfolk have benefited from 60 start-up loans, totalling nearly £500,000. They also have the growing business fund, which provides grants of up to £500,000 per business, where there is an opportunity to innovate and grow and create jobs.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Small businesses often rely on each other for mutual support; that is certainly the case in my constituency. Will the Minister please explain to her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions how detrimental it would be for small businesses and the town centre economy if they relocate 250 jobs out of Merthyr Tydfil town centre as part of their push to centralise jobs and services?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about our high streets. Obviously, the Government play an important part in that respect in making decisions that affect our regions. I would like to reassure him about what we are doing for high streets and the retail sector. With the Retail Sector Council, we are looking at business costs and elements around skills and employment on the high street. We remain committed to making sure that our high streets remain the heart of our communities. I will make sure that I do everything in my capacity as Minister to achieve that.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Minister outline any initiatives that are being considered to offset high street rates to encourage businesses to not only trade online but have a presence in local high streets? Some of my constituents have done that, and they have been quite successful.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point with regard to traditional retail and online sales. I have spoken with the likes of Amazon and eBay, and one thing I have been extremely surprised at is that they have worked with small businesses that have started online but then invested in bricks-and-mortar retail outlets. We need to work to make sure we have a mixed economy, and I have outlined the work we are doing with the Retail Sector Council, particularly looking at business rates and other issues.

**Andrew Griffiths** (Burton) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the work she does for small businesses. She will know that one of the major challenges small businesses face is not just with late payments but with getting prompt payments and reasonable terms from bigger businesses. Will she ensure that the Government do all they can to end the scourge of late payment? Will she also ensure that the prompt payment code has some teeth so that it actually does the job it is supposed to?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting prompt payment. It is a particular focus within the Department to tackle late payments, which can be very damaging to small businesses. This week, the Chartered Institute of Credit Management has announced that there are 17 businesses that I have removed or suspended from the prompt payment code to make sure that we highlight where bad practice is occurring. We want to bring business with us. We do know that late payments can have a major impact on small businesses, and I therefore stand committed to ensuring that we do all we can as a Government to end this poor practice.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): This morning I met Matt Dowling of the Freelancer Club, who adumbrated to me some of the terrible situations that freelancers have faced when trying to be paid, often being coaxed into working for nothing for things like experience. Will the Minister meet me and Mr Dowling to discuss how we might crack down on that?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** Absolutely. I reiterate that this Government do not support the culture of poor payments and late payments. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the concerns of those in a particular sector who might face trouble getting paid for legitimate work. I would be very happy to meet him and that organisation.

**UK-EU Trading Relationship: Industrial Strategy**

3. **Mr Adrian Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the effect of uncertainty of the UK’s trading relationship with the EU on the delivery of the industrial strategy.

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Greg Clark): As the hon. Gentleman will know, there are huge opportunities for advanced manufacturers, especially in his region, and the sector...
benefits from a minimum of frictions in trade, so it is very important that we conclude a deal with the European Union.

Mr Bailey: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply and commend him for his approach. Boosting productivity is the declared objective of the industrial strategy, but it is plummeting at the moment due to Brexit uncertainty. Does he agree that it is absolutely essential that we get an early Brexit deal that delivers both a customs union and frictionless market access to the EU, because otherwise it is doomed to failure?

Greg Clark: I am a bit more optimistic than the hon. Gentleman in that respect, not least because of the announcement just yesterday from the Advanced Propulsion Centre, which he knows very well, about the opportunity of nearly £5 billion for manufacturers, including in the west midlands, to participate in the growing market for electric vehicle batteries. It is therefore crucial that we drive productivity forward. He will also know of the work that Jürgen Maier is leading, as part of the Made Smarter Review, to capitalise on the opportunities. However, as I have always been clear with the House, we can best advantage those manufacturers if they are able to continue to trade freely and without frictions with the European Union.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government have held discussions with a range of businesses, including those with complex customs requirements and those that export and trade mainly with the European Union, in formulating all their plans?

Greg Clark: I and my colleagues meet very regularly—every day—with businesses in all sectors and in all parts of the country. I think that there is a strong feeling in the business community that we need to bring to a resolution the question of our future relationship with the European Union. The longer this situation goes on, the more attractive investment decisions are put on hold, and they could be creating jobs now.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The most recent quarterly economic survey from the North East England chamber of commerce shows a reported mark-down in sales and exports from the north-east. It states:

“We frequently hear from members that uncertainty over Brexit is delaying investment and hiring decisions for their businesses and their customers.”

What specific north-east-focused steps are the Government taking to ensure that the north-east business community and local jobs will not be affected by that, given that the Government’s own analysis shows that any Brexit outcome will affect the north-east the hardest?

Greg Clark: One specific north-east-focused step is to invite the hon. Lady to vote for the deal that has been put before the House.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The steel industry is, rightly, a key part of the industrial strategy. In that context, what early discussions has the Secretary of State had on the steel charter and the key asks contained within it?

Mr Bailey: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply and commend him for his approach. Boosting productivity is the declared objective of the industrial strategy, but it is plummeting at the moment due to Brexit uncertainty. Does he agree that it is absolutely essential that we get an early Brexit deal that delivers both a customs union and frictionless market access to the EU, because otherwise it is doomed to failure?

Greg Clark: I am a bit more optimistic than the hon. Gentleman in that respect, not least because of the announcement just yesterday from the Advanced Propulsion Centre, which he knows very well, about the opportunity of nearly £5 billion for manufacturers, including in the west midlands, to participate in the growing market for electric vehicle batteries. It is therefore crucial that we drive productivity forward. He will also know of the work that Jürgen Maier is leading, as part of the Made Smarter Review, to capitalise on the opportunities. However, as I have always been clear with the House, we can best advantage those manufacturers if they are able to continue to trade freely and without frictions with the European Union.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government have held discussions with a range of businesses, including those with complex customs requirements and those that export and trade mainly with the European Union, in formulating all their plans?

Greg Clark: I and my colleagues meet very regularly—every day—with businesses in all sectors and in all parts of the country. I think that there is a strong feeling in the business community that we need to bring to a resolution the question of our future relationship with the European Union. The longer this situation goes on, the more attractive investment decisions are put on hold, and they could be creating jobs now.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The most recent quarterly economic survey from the North East England chamber of commerce shows a reported mark-down in sales and exports from the north-east. It states:

“We frequently hear from members that uncertainty over Brexit is delaying investment and hiring decisions for their businesses and their customers.”

What specific north-east-focused steps are the Government taking to ensure that the north-east business community and local jobs will not be affected by that, given that the Government’s own analysis shows that any Brexit outcome will affect the north-east the hardest?

Greg Clark: One specific north-east-focused step is to invite the hon. Lady to vote for the deal that has been put before the House.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The steel industry is, rightly, a key part of the industrial strategy. In that context, what early discussions has the Secretary of State had on the steel charter and the key asks contained within it?

Mr Bailey: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply and commend him for his approach. Boosting productivity is the declared objective of the industrial strategy, but it is plummeting at the moment due to Brexit uncertainty. Does he agree that it is absolutely essential that we get an early Brexit deal that delivers both a customs union and frictionless market access to the EU, because otherwise it is doomed to failure?

Greg Clark: I am a bit more optimistic than the hon. Gentleman in that respect, not least because of the announcement just yesterday from the Advanced Propulsion Centre, which he knows very well, about the opportunity of nearly £5 billion for manufacturers, including in the west midlands, to participate in the growing market for electric vehicle batteries. It is therefore crucial that we drive productivity forward. He will also know of the work that Jürgen Maier is leading, as part of the Made Smarter Review, to capitalise on the opportunities. However, as I have always been clear with the House, we can best advantage those manufacturers if they are able to continue to trade freely and without frictions with the European Union.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government have held discussions with a range of businesses, including those with complex customs requirements and those that export and trade mainly with the European Union, in formulating all their plans?

Greg Clark: I and my colleagues meet very regularly—every day—with businesses in all sectors and in all parts of the country. I think that there is a strong feeling in the business community that we need to bring to a resolution the question of our future relationship with the European Union. The longer this situation goes on, the more attractive investment decisions are put on hold, and they could be creating jobs now.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The most recent quarterly economic survey from the North East England chamber of commerce shows a reported mark-down in sales and exports from the north-east. It states:

“We frequently hear from members that uncertainty over Brexit is delaying investment and hiring decisions for their businesses and their customers.”

What specific north-east-focused steps are the Government taking to ensure that the north-east business community and local jobs will not be affected by that, given that the Government’s own analysis shows that any Brexit outcome will affect the north-east the hardest?

Greg Clark: One specific north-east-focused step is to invite the hon. Lady to vote for the deal that has been put before the House.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The steel industry is, rightly, a key part of the industrial strategy. In that context, what early discussions has the Secretary of State had on the steel charter and the key asks contained within it?

Mr Bailey: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply and commend him for his approach. Boosting productivity is the declared objective of the industrial strategy, but it is plummeting at the moment due to Brexit uncertainty. Does he agree that it is absolutely essential that we get an early Brexit deal that delivers both a customs union and frictionless market access to the EU, because otherwise it is doomed to failure?

Greg Clark: I am a bit more optimistic than the hon. Gentleman in that respect, not least because of the announcement just yesterday from the Advanced Propulsion Centre, which he knows very well, about the opportunity of nearly £5 billion for manufacturers, including in the west midlands, to participate in the growing market for electric vehicle batteries. It is therefore crucial that we drive productivity forward. He will also know of the work that Jürgen Maier is leading, as part of the Made Smarter Review, to capitalise on the opportunities. However, as I have always been clear with the House, we can best advantage those manufacturers if they are able to continue to trade freely and without frictions with the European Union.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government have held discussions with a range of businesses, including those with complex customs requirements and those that export and trade mainly with the European Union, in formulating all their plans?

Greg Clark: I and my colleagues meet very regularly—every day—with businesses in all sectors and in all parts of the country. I think that there is a strong feeling in the business community that we need to bring to a resolution the question of our future relationship with the European Union. The longer this situation goes on, the more attractive investment decisions are put on hold, and they could be creating jobs now.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The most recent quarterly economic survey from the North East England chamber of commerce shows a reported mark-down in sales and exports from the north-east. It states:

“We frequently hear from members that uncertainty over Brexit is delaying investment and hiring decisions for their businesses and their customers.”

What specific north-east-focused steps are the Government taking to ensure that the north-east business community and local jobs will not be affected by that, given that the Government’s own analysis shows that any Brexit outcome will affect the north-east the hardest?

Greg Clark: One specific north-east-focused step is to invite the hon. Lady to vote for the deal that has been put before the House.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The steel industry is, rightly, a key part of the industrial strategy. In that context, what early discussions has the Secretary of State had on the steel charter and the key asks contained within it?

Mr Bailey: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply and commend him for his approach. Boosting productivity is the declared objective of the industrial strategy, but it is plummeting at the moment due to Brexit uncertainty. Does he agree that it is absolutely essential that we get an early Brexit deal that delivers both a customs union and frictionless market access to the EU, because otherwise it is doomed to failure?

Greg Clark: I am a bit more optimistic than the hon. Gentleman in that respect, not least because of the announcement just yesterday from the Advanced Propulsion Centre, which he knows very well, about the opportunity of nearly £5 billion for manufacturers, including in the west midlands, to participate in the growing market for electric vehicle batteries. It is therefore crucial that we drive productivity forward. He will also know of the work that Jürgen Maier is leading, as part of the Made Smarter Review, to capitalise on the opportunities. However, as I have always been clear with the House, we can best advantage those manufacturers if they are able to continue to trade freely and without frictions with the European Union.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government have held discussions with a range of businesses, including those with complex customs requirements and those that export and trade mainly with the European Union, in formulating all their plans?

Greg Clark: I and my colleagues meet very regularly—every day—with businesses in all sectors and in all parts of the country. I think that there is a strong feeling in the business community that we need to bring to a resolution the question of our future relationship with the European Union. The longer this situation goes on, the more attractive investment decisions are put on hold, and they could be creating jobs now.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The most recent quarterly economic survey from the North East England chamber of commerce shows a reported mark-down in sales and exports from the north-east. It states:

“We frequently hear from members that uncertainty over Brexit is delaying investment and hiring decisions for their businesses and their customers.”

What specific north-east-focused steps are the Government taking to ensure that the north-east business community and local jobs will not be affected by that, given that the Government’s own analysis shows that any Brexit outcome will affect the north-east the hardest?

Greg Clark: One specific north-east-focused step is to invite the hon. Lady to vote for the deal that has been put before the House.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The steel industry is, rightly, a key part of the industrial strategy. In that context, what early discussions has the Secretary of State had on the steel charter and the key asks contained within it?
Chris Skidmore: That will be part of the consultation. We will set out our final proposals for the guarantee as soon as possible—as I said, before the summer recess. In the meantime, the right signals are already emerging.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As we have heard, rather than publish a smart export guarantee that actually works, the Tories plan to further stifle the industry by hiking VAT on solar. Is it not time that the Minister’s Government stopped the Tory war on renewables and started taking climate change seriously by following the leadership of Scotland’s First Minister and declaring a climate emergency?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman fails to mention the success story that is solar photovoltaic. Over the past eight years since May 2010, under the coalition Government and this Government, 99% of capacity has been deployed. That is 49% of the total investment in the EU. We have installed more than twice as much solar capacity as any other European country—more than Germany, France and Australia combined. That is something he should welcome rather than talk down.

Drew Hendry: The Minister has his head in the sand over climate change. Last week, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee concluded that the UK could not credibly adopt a net zero emissions target without greater investment in new technologies. If the Tories will not act, when will they devolve the powers to Scotland, so the Scottish Government can show them how to do it?

Chris Skidmore: On the net zero target, we will obviously wait on the Committee on Climate Change report, which will be published on Thursday 2 May. I am sure the hon. Gentleman welcomes the Government’s success story on solar capacity and renewables. In comparison with the early 1990s, emissions have come down by 40% while the economy grew by 72%. There is more to do—there will always be more to do—but we are on the right track and doing the right thing. Solar capacity has reached 30 GW, compared with an estimate of 10 GW to 12 GW. We continue to ensure we exceed our targets.

Sustainable Packaging

Andrew Stephenson: The UK has committed to being a global leader on this topic. We have already taken more than 15 billion plastic carrier bags out of the economy, we are consulting on a deposit return scheme and we have introduced proposals for a world-leading new tax on plastic packaging that does not meet minimum thresholds. There is always more that we can do, but there is an awful lot that we have already done.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does the Minister recognise the contribution of the UK packaging manufacturing industry, which has annual sales of £12 billion, employs 85,000 people and makes up 3% of the UK manufacturing base, in working closely to increase the percentage of recycled material by using innovative new technologies and materials?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The UK plastics industry is vital to our economy, employing more than 170,000 people. This new challenge for the sector allows it to create new jobs as it embraces our challenging targets and ambitions in this area.

20. [910612] Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The UK plastic pact is an important part of our achieving a circular economy and preventing plastics from ending up in our oceans. However, one year into this seven-year commitment, we still do not have the information on whether the warm words have been matched by firm action. Will the Minister introduce transparent benchmarking and reporting mechanisms, so that we can all hold the Government and the plastics industry to account?

Andrew Stephenson: Most major supermarkets are signatories to that pact, and we have certainly seen some go further than others. A lot of lessons can be learned. It is a mixed picture at the moment, so I am certainly keen to keep this area under review. I particularly praise Morrisons, which has come out with a range of things on this, but there are many other supermarkets available that are working hard on this topic. We all have to work together on this—consumers, business and the Government.

Business: Start and Growth

6. Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): What recent progress he has made on meeting the Government’s ambition to make the UK the best place to start and grow a business.

Andrew Stephenson: To encourage the next generation of innovative entrepreneurs, our modern industrial strategy announced the biggest increase in public research and development funding on record—an extra £7 billion by 2021-22. We have also launched an independent review of the barriers facing young entrepreneurs, and we have published a review of the barriers facing female entrepreneurs.
Adam Afriyie: I very much welcome that answer, and I very much welcome the Minister on his debut appearance at the Dispatch Box. I would also very much like to welcome him to Windsor, where residents of the royal borough have the lowest council tax in the country and residents of Bracknell Forest have low council tax but also high-quality services. That is why so many talented people come to Windsor to live and work. Will the Minister join me in recognising the good work of the Thames Valley Berkshire local enterprise partnership and the two key local authorities in making the Windsor constituency a great place to live, work and, above all, to start and run a business?

Andrew Stephenson: I agree with my hon. Friend and welcome his support for the good work of the Thames Valley Berkshire LEP and his local councils. My officials will work with his LEP and its local authority partners to produce a local industrial strategy for Berkshire that will boost productivity and support business start-ups. That is in addition to the £142 million local growth fund investment that we have already made in the county.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Similarly, in my constituency, young entrepreneurs trying to set up businesses, particularly in the digital sector, face a real shortage in the availability of electricity through the district grid—an issue identified by my local LEP. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the LEP to see what can be done to improve the situation?

Andrew Stephenson: We are working closely with LEPs on this issue, but I will be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): To be the best place to grow and start a business means having consistent rules and regulations. My brilliant local Medway Licensed Taxi Drivers Association has raised a real concern about Uber operating in Medway without having the same rules and regulations as association members. Will the Minister meet me and that brilliant association to look at those rules and regulations, to ensure that they are fair? I declare an interest: I have relatives in that trade.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is a huge champion of his constituency, and particularly its small businesses. That meeting would probably be more appropriate with the small business Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), and I am sure that she will be happy to take such a meeting.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that after our eventual departure from the EU the growth of more small businesses and the expansion of existing small businesses, freed from the EU, will boost productivity and support business start-ups. We are ranked in the top 10 globally as a place to do business, and this Government will continue to do everything they can to support small business.

Fracking: Methane Leaksages

7. Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he has taken to reduce methane leakages as a result of fracking.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The UK has many years of experience regulating the onshore oil and gas industry, and measures are in place to minimise methane emissions. The Environment Agency issues and robustly enforces legally binding environmental permits regulating methane emissions. Under these permits, operators must have an agreed gas management plan to detect leaks and make repairs over the lifetime of site operations. They must also monitor emissions before and during shale gas operations.

Geraint Davies: The Minister will know that NASA and satellite data show that 5% of the methane from fracking is leaked through fugitive emissions and that methane is 85 times worse than carbon dioxide for global warming, which makes fracking worse than coal for climate change. Will he meet me to discuss my fracking Bill, instead of listening to Jim Ratcliffe, the richest man in Britain, from Ineos, who is hellbent on Brexit to avoid the environmental controls on fracking currently imposed by the European Union?

Chris Skidmore: I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and I would emphasise his comment about feeding in space data research. It highlights the importance of the UK space industry in looking at environmental issues. The Government also have a grant funding and environmental monitoring programme led by the British Geological Survey in respect of shale gas sites. All the information for that is publicly available. I also note that the MacKay-Stone 2013 report concluded that the carbon footprint of UK shale gas would be much less than that of coal and comparable to that of imported liquefied natural gas.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): There is no fracking in Scotland, there has been no fracking in Scotland and, under the SNP, there will be no fracking in Scotland. If we go on being serious about the climate emergency, there should not be fracking anywhere in the United Kingdom, so will the UK finally follow Scotland’s lead and rule out fracking on these islands?

Chris Skidmore: Unfortunately, residents and households in Scotland still need to use gas, given that 85% of UK households use gas for heating, and it is right that we look at opportunities to meet our energy demand. Some 47% of gas was imported in 2017, but if we do not take action, this could rise to 72%. We want to increase our opportunities for generating electricity through renewables. In quarter 3 of 2018, just 2.5% of electricity was generated by coal, compared with 40% in 2010, so we are going in the right direction, but we cannot forget that people will be using gas in Scotland.

Science Sector: International Collaboration

8. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to promote international collaboration in the science sector.
The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): As announced in the spring statement, I have invited Professor Sir Adrian Smith to provide independent advice on potential future funding schemes in the context of the UK’s future ambitions for European and international collaboration on science and innovation. I also look forward to welcoming delegations from over 50 countries to the EUREKA global innovation summit in Manchester this May.

Bob Blackman: Our world-class scientists collaborate across the world, with the EU and beyond, and that collaboration is vital for further research and innovation in this country. Horizon 2020 is a ready-made platform for that collaboration. Will my hon. Friend commit to joining the Horizon 2020 programme as we leave the EU?

Chris Skidmore: The Government have committed to guaranteeing all existing Horizon 2020 projects before Brexit. That was issued in August 2016 and demonstrated the Government’s commitment early on to protecting our scientific partnerships. We then had the underwrite extension in July 2018 which said that even once we had left the European Union—for two years up until December 2020—we would commit to funding those projects for the lifetime of them. We are now moving into negotiations on Horizon Europe, which is the successor scheme to Horizon 2020. I took part in the EU Competitiveness Council in February—I hope also to attend on 28 May—and it is our ambition to associate into Horizon Europe. On investment, my hon. Friend will be well aware that through our world-class universities we put in £4 billion and got back £5.7 billion in investment.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Even at the height of the cold war, there was a surprising level of collaboration between Russian and UK nuclear physicists. Will the Minister assure me that there will be similar collaboration when it comes to the skills that we have in the UK—particularly at Dounreay, in my constituency—in nuclear decommissioning, which is an industry that we could export and which could make a lot of money for the UK?

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree, and I pay tribute to our scientific partnerships. I have seen the innovation that is being developed. I recently announced £93 million for a robotics for hazardous environments programme involving about seven universities across the UK, which are looking into how we can use robotics more effectively to help nuclear decommissioning. I am delighted that that is now being transferred to Fukushima in Japan. The Government are ensuring that scientific collaboration is international. We will publish an international research and innovation strategy shortly, and I shall welcome any opportunities, involving any countries, to continue that work.

Supermarket Sector: Employment Contract Terms and Conditions

9. Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): What recent representations his Department has received on proposed changes to employment contract terms and conditions in the supermarket sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I regularly meet representatives of the supermarket sector, both individually and through the Retail Sector Council, to discuss a range of issues. One issue that the council has identified as a priority is employment. The Government have committed themselves to upgrading workers’ rights and protecting the most vulnerable workers in all sectors through the good work plan. That represents the biggest upgrade of workers’ rights for over 20 years.

Siobhain McDonagh: I apologise for arriving late, Mr Speaker. I am delighted to have the opportunity to ask the Minister to support Mrs A, who has worked for Asda for 30 years. Her take-home pay, and that of 3,000 other members of staff, will be cut because of changes in the pay structure masquerading as an hourly increase. Paid breaks will be reduced, the night shift will be changed, and bonuses will be slashed. Will the Minister join me in supporting Mrs A and ensuring that she keeps what she is earning now?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady was not late for her own question. Her principal responsibility is to be in her place to ask her question, and we are delighted to see her. She does not need to be too apologetic; in fact, she does not need to be apologetic at all.

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise those questions. She is a strong campaigner for workers in her constituency, and we have met on a number of occasions to discuss some of the issues involved. Obviously we want Asda employees to receive the remuneration to which they are entitled. It is true that a consultation is taking place on changes that may be introduced towards the end of the year, but, in general, terms and conditions are subject to negotiation between the employer and the employee. While it is always open to either party to enter into negotiations on the terms of contracts, if employees are subject to changes in terms to which they have not agreed, they can take legal action.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The Minister is right to champion workers’ rights, because ours is the party of the workers. However, there are still too many examples of employers not paying the national living wage. What further steps will the Government take to ensure that the national living wage is enforced and workers receive a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. He is right: we are the party of the workers, which is why we introduced the good work plan, the biggest reform of workers’ rights for 20 years. We are committed to enforcing the national minimum wage and ensuring that people receive the remuneration that they deserve. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has identified £24.4 million of arrears that affected more than 200,000 workers last year, which was an increase on the previous year. We have almost doubled the budget for enforcement since 2015, and we remain committed to ensuring that people receive the national minimum wage when they are entitled to it.
Climate Change: Discussions with DEFRA

11. Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on tackling climate change. [910601]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): Tackling climate change is a cross-Government priority. Just last week my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth made an oral statement outlining the Government’s climate change priorities. Ministers in the Departments for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs meet regularly to discuss matters including waste management, agriculture, forestry, resource efficiency and the environment Bill. We will host the upcoming Inter-Ministerial Group on Clean Growth to discuss the report from the Committee on Climate Change and the UK’s offer to host the United Nations Conference of the Parties in 2020.

Luke Pollard: After the Government’s refusal to declare a climate emergency, may I ask the Minister what he has personally taken away from the visit of 16-year-old Greta Thunberg and her most powerful advocacy on the need for urgent action?

Chris Skidmore: I think we will be having a thorough debate on this issue of climate change emergency in the Opposition day debate tomorrow. When it comes to my personal role as the Minister with responsibility for science, innovation and research, I entirely agree that we need to be making more investment in climate change technology in order to reach our target of 2.4% of GDP on research and development. We have already announced our missions in relation to clean growth. I absolutely believe we should be listening to the experts—that includes the scientists—and learning from climate science, wherever that may be, to make sure we can reduce our emissions.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Since the Rio summit in 1992, the UK has actually decarbonised more than any other G7 economy, while growing our economy the most at the same time. However, we need to do more, which is why I am looking forward to the Committee on Climate Change report on Thursday. If it does indeed recommend a net zero target, will the Minister commit to ensuring that is something the Government will very seriously consider bringing into law at the first opportunity?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the achievements that have been made in recent years, but it is important that we redouble our efforts. The Committee on Climate Change report, which will be published on Thursday, was commissioned by the Government, and the Government will be taking actions on the back of its recommendations. It is important that we look to continue our actions, but it is also important that we do so with our international partners. We have the UN summit taking place in September and future COPs, including the one we would like to host in 2020.

19. [910611] Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Committee on Climate Change says that we need to double our production of onshore wind in the next decade; instead, it is likely to halve because of this Government’s ideological opposition to it. We are not on target to meet our fourth and fifth carbon budgets, let alone achieve net zero, so will the Government end their ideological opposition to onshore wind so that we can hand a better planet on to future generations?

Chris Skidmore: I would not call listening to local communities and reflecting on the need to create sustainable communities locally “ideological opposition”. We need to work with everybody—all citizens. There has been talk of citizens’ committees, so why not ensure that local communities are able to reflect on the benefits of renewable energy in their communities, and begin such dialogues with them, rather than call them ideological opponents of renewables? I do not think that is very fair on those communities.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I would like to send the thoughts of Opposition Members to the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth. I welcome this Minister to his place and look forward to our exchanges over the Dispatch Box.

In 2016, the UK’s carbon emissions fell at 6% a year, and in 2017, emissions fell at 3% a year, but in 2018, the figure was 2%—just a 2% fall—so at a time when action should be ramping up to tackle the climate emergency, can the Minister explain why the UK’s progress is slowing down?

Chris Skidmore: I do not recognise that. The fact is that we have met our first and second carbon budgets over the 2008 to 2012 and 2013 to 2017 periods. We have managed to reach those targets. Turnover for clean business was up 7% in 2017, contributing £44.5 billion to the economy. When it comes to ensuring that we look at our clean growth strategy, we have set out quite clearly opportunities to halve the energy use of new buildings by 2030 and to establish the world’s first net zero carbon industrial cluster by 2040. By comparison with our European neighbours, we are racing ahead—we are leaders in this field—and we want to make sure that we can continue to do so.

Rebecca Long Bailey: With respect, the Minister is alluding to the UK’s emissions cuts since 2010, when the UK still benefited from policies put in place by the previous Labour Government—policies that the Conservatives have now scrapped. Secondly, it is irrelevant, quite frankly, to climate physics whether the UK is doing slightly better or worse than other countries that are also failing to take the necessary action.

I ask this in good faith and in all seriousness: does the Minister accept that the UK’s stalling progress is related to banning—in effect—onshore wind, reducing almost all support for solar power, scrapping the zero-carbon homes standard and selling off the Green Investment Bank? Will he be honest about the challenge, and work with Labour and Members right across this House on turning this around, so that we can truly tackle climate change and properly seize the economic opportunities within the green economy?
Chris Skidmore: It is important to recognise that 56% of electricity power generation is now based around low-carbon economy generation and that 33% of that is from renewables, up from 7% in 2010. Coal represents 2.5% of our electricity generation, and last weekend the UK went 90 hours without any coal electricity generation for the first time since the industrial revolution. As we are now involved in the fourth industrial revolution, we want to ensure that we continue to power through and that we can adopt more renewables for the future.

Renewable Energy Sources

12. Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): What plans the Government have to expand the use of renewable energy sources.

[910602]

16. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What progress he has made on promoting renewable energy generation.

[910606]

18. Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): What progress he has made on promoting renewable energy generation.

[910609]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): Last year, renewable generation provided a third of our electricity and, as I have stated, over the Easter weekend we went 90 hours without any coal generation. Both were new records. Our next contracts for difference allocation round will open next month. We are driving down the cost of clean technologies and investing £2.5 billion in low-carbon innovation.

Anna McMorrin: Far from leading the way, the UK has plummeted to the bottom of SolarPower Europe’s league table of 20 world markets in solar, and we are one of the few EU countries not providing any support at all to solar power. Not only has solar had all support removed prematurely but it is being hit by wave after wave of fresh damage, making it harder to meet our climate targets. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister meet me to discuss the damaging net effect of the Government’s policies on solar and on the transition to clean energy?

Chris Skidmore: I am sure that the Minister for Energy and Climate Change will be happy to meet the hon. Lady, but as I have stated, photovoltaics is a UK success story. We have seen 830,000 installations, and I have mentioned the smart export guarantee tariff that is being designed. We want to ensure that this will be able to generate profit for those companies, and that we continue to be able to lead Europe on this.

Mike Wood: Eliminating net carbon emissions by 2050 is both ambitious and achievable. Does my hon. Friend agree that the progress made over the past decade demonstrates that, where there is the political will, it is possible to reduce emissions while supporting economic prosperity?

Chris Skidmore: Absolutely. We need to deliver ambitious reductions in emissions, considering our long-term targets in the light of the latest science. That is why we have asked the Committee on Climate Change for advice on our long-term targets, including that net zero target. The committee’s advice will be published this Thursday, and we will consider it carefully.

Kirstene Hair: Of course we have a record to be proud of when it comes to renewable energy, but we should always continue to be as ambitious as we have been. How significant has the UK’s contribution been to ensuring that Scotland meets its renewable targets?

Chris Skidmore: The Government are firmly committed to the renewables industry, and Scotland has benefited proportionately more than the rest of the United Kingdom under existing policies. It will continue to benefit from future investment. Fifteen Scottish projects have been awarded contracts for difference with a total capacity of 2.57 GW, and the Government and numerous other public sector organisations have provided £15 million to fund the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney, which is one of the world’s leading wave and tidal demonstration centres.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The truth of the matter right now is that, far from expanding the source of renewables, the Government have narrowed the use of renewable energy in recent years. Of course we should strongly support the development of offshore wind, but the Minister must acknowledge that marine and tidal power has been almost strangled at birth by the Government’s indifference and even active hostility, and that onshore wind and solar PV have been severely hampered by adverse Government decisions on support and planning. On lack of support, will the Minister answer a specific question? Why is he sanctioning a VAT rate rise to 20% on solar power while at the same time maintaining a rate of just 5% on coal and fuel oil?

Chris Skidmore: The industry has invested more than £92 billion in clean energy since 2010. As I have stated, renewables now generate 33% of our electricity, and 52.8% comes from low-carbon sources. As for the VAT issue, we are working with organisations and companies to ensure that we can get the best possible deal when it comes to renewables. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth will be happy to discuss the matter with the hon. Gentleman in further detail, but we are committed to ensuring that we have a wide range of renewables, including marine energy and offshore and onshore wind, to make sure that we can continue to drive up our renewable capacity.

14. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Thirty gigawatts of installed solar shows that it is an essential tool to ensure clean growth and is vital in our fight against climate change. Despite the Treasury’s consultation, does the Minister agree that it should keep the reduced VAT rate for solar, which was guaranteed as recently as 2016?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) to discuss the issue.
Businesses in Taunton Deane

13. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What recent steps has he taken to support businesses in Taunton Deane constituency.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): The Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership, which covers both Somerset and Devon, is receiving £239 million through the local growth fund to drive regional economic development. That includes an investment of over £24 million in projects in Taunton Deane, such as the redevelopment of Taunton station and improvements to junction 25, which is one of the largest investments that we have made in the south-west through the local growth fund to date.

Rebecca Pow: I welcome the Minister to his new role. Will he join me in congratulating all those involved in the development of the new headquarters for the UK Hydrographic Office, the opening of which I attended in Taunton last week? Will he also join me in supporting the endeavour to use its expertise in marine data to open a marine geospatial innovation centre at Firepool in Taunton to open up opportunities in the blue economy?

Andrew Stephenson: I will of course join my hon. Friend in congratulating those involved in the opening of the new UK Hydrographic Office headquarters in her constituency. It is a world-class natural asset. The UKHO is working with local partners to scope the feasibility of developing a marine geospatial innovation centre in Taunton, and it plays a key role in the south-west’s local industrial strategy.

Workers’ Rights: Trade Union Discussions

15. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What plans he has to hold discussions with trades union representatives on increasing workers’ rights.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Informed by my regular discussions with trade unions, we have extended worker rights, and both Houses agreed last month to close the Swedish derogation loophole to protect agency workers. On 1 April, we celebrated with union representatives the 20th anniversary of the national minimum wage. The day was marked by the rise in the national living wage, which has delivered the fastest pay rise for the lowest paid in at least 20 years, benefiting nearly 1.8 million workers.

Martyn Day: The Scottish Trades Union Congress general secretary, Grahame Smith, has said that the Scottish Government’s “Fair Work Action Plan demonstrates a commitment to using the powers the Government has at its disposal to deliver Fair Work, which is good for workers and good for business.” Will the Secretary of State do his bit by introducing a real living wage? If not, will he devolve the policy so that the Scottish Government can?

Greg Clark: What the hon. Gentleman did not mention is that this Government introduced the national living wage, and we have just increased it to its highest-ever level, benefiting millions of people around the country. I would have thought that he would welcome that.

Laurie Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): There are many warm words from the Government on workers’ rights, but to say that the Conservatives are the party of workers is a joke, because their actions in government tell a different story. Strong economies are almost always underpinned by strong trade union rights. Germany, Sweden, Norway and Denmark all have extensive sectoral collective bargaining coverage, which has been used to reduce income inequality and drive up wages. The hostility towards trade unions and the dismissal of collective bargaining here is not just bad for workers but bad for the economy, creating a vicious cycle of lower wages, reducing tax revenues and lowering spending. The obsession with undermining union rights is self-defeating. What is the Secretary of State doing to break the cycle?

Greg Clark: If you want to be the party of workers, you need to be the party that creates work. There are 1.5 million more people employed in work as a result of this Government’s policies, and of course we want to make sure they are in good jobs. The effort of our industrial strategy is to drive up productivity, which is necessary if pay rates are to increase over time. The hon. Lady should acknowledge the reforms, brought in partly as a result of the Matthew Taylor report, that have closed the Swedish derogation, which her party failed to close over 13 years in office.

Topical Questions

T1. Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Nearly 30 years ago Margaret Thatcher made a speech at the UN General Assembly in which she described “what may be early signs of man-induced climatic change.” Ever since then, the UK has continued to lead the world on this issue. The UK, yet again, broke its coal-free power generation record, which now amounts to more than three and a half days without any electricity being generated from coal, over the weekend—the longest period since the industrial revolution in which coal has not been burned for power in this country.

Later this week we have another seminal moment in which the independent Committee on Climate Change will report back, at the Government’s request, on how we can set a date to achieve net zero emissions—once again, this country is leading the world on climate change.

Stephen Kinnock: I am sure the House will wish to join me in paying tribute to the management, the workforce and the emergency services who dealt so effectively with the explosion at the steelworks in my constituency on Friday. We wish the two men who received minor injuries all the best.

The predecessor of the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) promised the last meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal-related industries that he would host a meeting of steel sector stakeholders, supply chains and steel MPs to
discuss the failure to develop a steel sector deal. Will the Minister now commit to honouring that commitment and to meeting us as soon as possible?

Greg Clark: First, I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the workers at Port Talbot and to the emergency services, which responded with characteristic bravery and dispatch to deal with that very worrying incident. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), and I spoke to the company and the trade unions the next morning, and we are all relieved that the situation was not worse. Of course, we send our sympathies to the workers affected.

As the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) knows from an earlier answer, we are clear on the importance of the steel sector for the future of manufacturing generally, and I take a personal interest. These are early days for the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle, but I know he shares my enthusiasm, and perhaps we can both come to that meeting.

T4. [910619] Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): British businesses in all sectors currently benefit greatly from the ability of UK-based law firms to advise and represent them in all matters when they conduct business within the European Union. What steps is my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), and I spoke to the company and the trade unions the next morning, and we are all relieved that the situation was not worse. Of course, we send our sympathies to the workers affected.

As the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) knows from an earlier answer, we are clear on the importance of the steel sector for the future of manufacturing generally, and I take a personal interest. These are early days for the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle, but I know he shares my enthusiasm, and perhaps we can both come to that meeting.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend, who chairs the Select Committee on Justice, makes an excellent point on one of our principal sources of export earnings. More than that, the pre-eminence of law in the UK brings firms from jurisdictions around the world to do business here. We are determined that we should maintain our good relations across the continent and that we should keep step with those when they conduct business within the European Union. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking with other Ministers to ensure that commercial advantage is not lost as we leave the EU?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend, who chairs the Select Committee on Justice, makes an excellent point on one of our principal sources of export earnings. More than that, the pre-eminence of law in the UK brings firms from jurisdictions around the world to do business here. We are determined that we should maintain our good relations across the continent and that we should keep step with those when they conduct business within the European Union. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking with other Ministers to ensure that commercial advantage is not lost as we leave the EU?

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On 4 April, the Office for Product Safety and Standards published its investigation into Whirlpool and the ongoing issue of its product safety. The report was lambasted by consumer organisations, including Which?, as weak. Just days later it was revealed in the media that Whirlpool had modified the software that had been modified. Can the Minister tell us whether the OPSS was aware of those allegations and, if not, whether it will now reopen its investigation in light of the accusations?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue, and I commit to making sure that I speak to the OPSS about the allegations she has highlighted and what further information we can ascertain. She is right, in that I laid a written ministerial statement before the House on 4 April. I have to let the House know that the OPSS has written to Whirlpool asking it to take action, and it has 28 days to reply to that. I stand ready, as the Minister, to make sure that consumer safety and protection is at the heart of what we are doing and that we take further action where necessary.

T7. [910622] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Many of my constituents still access some form of off-grid energy. While the Department looks to introduce a cleaner form of energy, will it also look at the cost impact of energy? Many of these people are also in fuel poverty and would like not only a clean form of energy, but a cheap one.

Greg Clark: I recognise the situation my hon. Friend describes; in his rural constituency, this is a big problem. In the spring statement, we announced that the future homes standard would ensure that all new buildings, including those in rural areas, are equipped with low-carbon sources of heat and power by 2025. We also recognise the importance of households that are off the gas grid and have them in mind as we deal with the energy companies in terms of their tariffs.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): This Government are not even hiding their disdain for Scottish business, with one of them telling the BBC recently: “Once you’ve hit the”—

Brexit—

“iceberg, you’re all on it together”.

When will the Minister accept that if he will not provide that level of security and that lifeboat, the Scottish people will, by voting for independence?

Greg Clark: It is a sad reflection that the job creation that has taken place in Scotland lags behind that in the rest of the UK. I fancy that one reason for that is that Scotland has acquired a reputation for being the highest-tax part of the UK. So I hope the hon. Gentleman would reflect on these causes and advise his colleagues in Holyrood to take a different course.

T9. [910624] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): England is currently the only home nation that provides no central Government investment to improve domestic energy efficiency. To address this deficit, will the Secretary of State take up the Committee on Fuel Poverty’s proposal for the introduction of a new clean growth fuel poverty challenge fund?

Greg Clark: I am aware of the advice from the committee, which we will consider carefully. My hon. Friend will know that the energy company obligation has been reformed to concentrate on fuel poverty, but we are grateful for the committee’s advice and we will respond shortly.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Secretary of State will agree with more than 80 cross-party MPs who came together yesterday to say that to realise the northern powerhouse vision, we need the economic commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail and HS2. Will he communicate that to
aspirant Members from his party who want to see a race to the bottom in the next Tory leadership race? The north will not tolerate that.

**Greg Clark**: Across the country, it is crucial that we invest in infrastructure. If we want to compete with other nations across the world, we need to make sure that our businesses and our people can count on fast connections, and that includes between our great cities.

**Richard Harrington** (Watford) (Con): Now that I am not bound by the ministerial code, or indeed collective responsibility, I feel that I can speak my mind about sector deals. I think they are absolutely brilliant, and I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to point out some of the achievements made on delivering the commitments made between the Government and industry.

**Mr Speaker**: I cannot say that I had noticed that the hon. Gentleman was previously all that closely bound.

**Greg Clark**: That was my experience, too, Mr Speaker. Goodness knows what my hon. Friend will be like now that he is on the Back Benches. May I pay tribute to the fantastic work he did in securing so many of the sector deals? He got to know very well the needs of particular industries and sectors. Let me pay tribute to the creative industries sector deal, for example, which this very weekend launched a new immersive technology version of “Peaky Blinders”. I do not know whether he is a fan of that series. If he is—

**Mr Speaker**: What is it?

**Greg Clark**: “Peaky Blinders” is an award-winning programme, which my hon. Friend will be able to experience in virtual reality as a result of the sector deal done with our creative industries, particularly the gaming industry.

**T5. [910620] Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): A recent report by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders estimated that the UK could lead the world in connected and autonomous vehicles. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that UK car manufacturers can seize this opportunity?

**Greg Clark**: The hon. Lady will know that the investment that is being made through the industrial strategy in testbed facilities and data centres for connected and autonomous vehicles is geared towards making Britain the go-to place in the world for the development, deployment and manufacture of such vehicles. As the hon. Lady takes an interest in the sector, I would be keen to pursue the matter further.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Shared parental leave is a good option for new parents, but the Secretary of State will know that take-up remains low. Will he consider introducing a stand-alone period of parental leave just for partners, to help families to balance work and childcare?

**Kelly Tolhurst**: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. She is a keen champion of rights for parents. I agree that fathers and partners have a key role to play in caring for their children. The shared parental leave and pay scheme gives parents more choice and flexibility and challenges the assumption that the mother will always be the primary carer. Last year, the Government ran a £1.5 million campaign to promote shared parental leave and to increase its take-up, and we are preparing a further campaign for later in the year. I assure my hon. Friend that we always keep these things under review. I am keen to meet her in the near future to discuss her particular concerns.

**T6. [910621] Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): The Government’s industrial strategy has recently drawn criticism for neglecting steel. The UK steel charter was mentioned earlier; will Ministers attend the launch of the charter on 20 May and sign up to it on behalf of the Department, to maximise opportunities for UK steel in uncertain times?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Andrew Stephenson): I look forward to working with the UK steel sector and have already had several engagements. Steel overcapacity remains a significant global issue that requires international solutions, but here in the UK we have already done a range of things, including identifying more than £3.8 billion a year of UK domestic requirement for steel.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. We are running out of time—indeed, we have run out of time—but I know that the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), who is a practitioner of caring and sharing, will want to be pithy to accommodate colleagues.

**Sarah Newton**: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Princess Royal helped to mark a significant milestone in the exploration of deep geothermal energy in Cornwall, as the deepest and hottest hole on the UK mainland has been successfully drilled. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meet me to discuss what more the Government can do to support this potentially scalable new source of renewable energy?

**The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation** (Chris Skidmore): I congratulate my hon. Friend’s constituents on the work they have done on geothermal energy, which is an exciting form of renewable energy. I am going to Cornwall on 24 May, so I will see whether I can meet my hon. Friend. I know that the University of Exeter is involved in the project, and I would be keen to pursue the matter further.

**T8. [910623] Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I came to the House today hoping for some passion and leadership from the Secretary of State. There is a real opportunity for British business and universities to tackle climate change with innovation and enterprise. What do we get today? The dullest Question Time I have ever seen in this place.

**Greg Clark**: The hon. Gentleman should celebrate the fact that, when it comes to renewable energy, we are the leading nation in the world for the deployment of offshore wind. We are creating jobs right throughout...
the country, and many constituencies have people in good jobs because of the leadership in renewable energy that we have displayed. We will go further in the years ahead.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Solar plus battery storage will soon be commercially viable without any subsidy. Is now the right time to plan for a huge deployment of solar on every public building, school, hospital and prison?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. If there is the possibility of more renewable energy than was previously contemplated and we can store it, we will solve our energy needs for the future, thereby helping business and consumers. I shall take up my hon. Friend’s suggestion.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): My constituent was made redundant from Carillion last April after 11 years’ service as a cleaner. She has been passed from pillar to post, from PwC to the insolvency services. Will the Minister please look into this case as a matter of urgency?

Kelly Tolhurst: I would welcome it if the hon. Lady passed me the details of her constituent, so that I can follow up that matter.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): In North Devon, we are proudly playing our role in clean energy generation with two major wind farms. Does the Minister agree that, to ensure our security of supply and to get the best climate change outcomes, we need a mix of clean energy generation?

Chris Skidmore: Absolutely. It is important that we put that mix in place. We have already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) about looking at other forms of renewables. There is also carbon capture and storage. We need to ensure that we look at new technologies to be able to deliver a low-carbon future.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The enterprise finance guarantee scheme and its continued use by the Royal Bank of Scotland is still causing controversy. Even this week, we have seen discussions from the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) around the use of debt. Will the Minister, or the Department, discuss with the Treasury how this scheme and its legacy are now operating?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that matter at BEIS questions today. I will happily take on that challenge.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Small businesses in Cleethorpes are suffering because of yet another two high street bank closures. Individuals and businesses need both the counter services and expert financial advice from banks. Indeed, banks are important to the vitality and viability of our high streets. Will Ministers assist local authorities in establishing financial hubs, where financial institutions can come together and provide that service?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise concerns about banks pulling out of our high streets. Those concerns have also been raised by many other MPs across the country. High street banks do offer a valuable service for consumers, and that is why I am grateful to the Post Office for renegotiating the banking framework, which will offer better payments to postmasters providing banking services in those high streets. However, he is quite right: we do need to work closely with local authorities at a regional level to make sure that the services being offered on the high street are those that people wish to see.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Minister confirm that the Secretary of State for Scotland put in writing his objection to onshore wind finding a route to market in Scotland? Why will the Government not release that correspondence in the interests of transparency?

Greg Clark: I am not aware of the inquiry that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. I will follow it up with the Scottish Secretary.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, where is young Graham? I was going to call the fella.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) anticipated my question.

Mr Speaker: Well, that is a novel phenomenon—a Member who takes the attitude that someone else has asked the question and therefore says that he will desist. That is a most admirable trait, if an uncommon one.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Competition and Markets Authority have both published reports calling for change in the UK audit industry. Will the Secretary of State undertake at the Dispatch Box that the power of the big four audit firms in the UK will not stop this agenda for change?

Greg Clark: I will give that commitment. I am very pleased that the Competition and Markets Authority has launched that report and made some interim recommendations. We will be looking at them during the weeks ahead. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that this is a sector that is fundamental to the confidence that we have in businesses right across the country.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Everybody wants to do their bit by recycling, but it is absolutely infuriating when we get to the supermarket and all the fruit and veg is wrapped in plastic. Then there is the exciting moment when we get home to the kitchen and see that there is a little sign, which looks like the packaging is recyclable, but then we read the words, “Not yet recyclable”. What on earth do they mean by that? Are we meant to keep it all until, suddenly, somebody announces that it is now recyclable? Are we meant to put it in the attic or store it in a cupboard? What are we meant to do? Surely, we should ban those words. The packaging is not recyclable and it should not be available.
Chris Skidmore: I entirely sympathise with the hon. Gentleman’s frustration on this point. I hope that he also noticed when it came to the London marathon this weekend—congratulations to all hon. Members from all parts of the House who took part in that marathon—that the water was in bottles made not of plastic, but of compostable seaweed. As a science Minister, I can say that a key issue is looking at what we can do to develop alternative forms of plastic, but we have to work with local authorities and supermarkets to make that happen.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I know—from chairing the all-party parliamentary group for small and micro-business, and from talking with west Oxfordshire businesses—that one of the major challenges that small organisations face is finding sufficient people of the right skills to grow their businesses. What are Ministers doing to provide a national strategy to ensure that our young people have the skills they need for the future?

Kelly Tolhurst: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group; he is extremely passionate about this subject and does a lot to champion small businesses in his constituency. We have outlined a £1.3 billion investment in UK talent and skills to attract the best. We are also keen to work with businesses—particularly small ones—to ensure that we are delivering on our apprenticeship targets. We have seen some fantastic results when young people have been brought into organisations and been given the training and workplace experience to grow and thrive. I very much hope to champion such schemes as we go forward.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The other week, I was shocked to meet a constituent who had worked in care for nine months solidly without being given a single day off, while on a zero-hours contract. Such workers, who are vulnerable, need protection for their rights at work. Will the Secretary of State look at bringing in group claims for industrial tribunals and representative cases so that workers do not have to stick their head above the parapet?

Greg Clark: I was pleased to meet the hon. Lady yesterday to discuss this matter. I share her concerns about the case that she mentioned and take her suggestion very seriously. As I have committed to her, we will take this forward together.
Overseas Students: English Language Tests

12.46 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Urgent Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his review of the cases of overseas students falsely accused of cheating in Test of English for International Communication English language tests.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Test centres operated on behalf of the Educational Testing Service were the subject of a BBC “Panorama” programme in February 2014 that aired footage of the systematic cheating in English language tests at a number of its UK test centres. Further investigation demonstrated just how widespread this was, and the scale is shown by the fact that 25 people involved in organising and facilitating language test fraud have received criminal convictions. They have been sentenced to a total of over 70 years’ imprisonment, and further criminal investigations are ongoing.

There was also a strong link to wider abuse of the student visa route. A National Audit Office report in 2012 made it clear that abuse of that route was rife and estimated that in 2009—its first year of operation—up to 50,000 people used the tier 4 student route to work, not study. Most students who were linked to this fraud were sponsored by private colleges, many of which the Home Office had significant concerns about before the BBC investigation. Indeed, 400 colleges that had sponsored students linked to the ETS had already had their licences revoked before 2014.

Over the course of 2014, the ETS systematically analysed all tests taken in the UK dating back to 2011—more than 58,000 tests. Analysis of the test results identified 33,725 invalid results and 22,694 questionable results. Those with questionable results were given the chance to re-sit a test or attend an interview before any action was taken. People who used invalid ETS certificates to obtain immigration leave have had action taken against them.

The courts have consistently found that the evidence for invalid cases created a reasonable suspicion of fraud and was enough for the Home Office to act upon. It is then up to individuals to refute this, either through appeals or judicial reviews. Despite this, concerns have been expressed about whether innocent people could have been caught up in this. The Home Secretary has listened to the apprehensions of some Members, including the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and has asked officials for further advice. The National Audit Office is also currently in the process of concluding an investigation into the handling of these issues, and this is expected to be published next month. Obviously, the Home Secretary has taken a close interest in the issue and will be reviewing the conclusions of the National Audit Office, and he will make a statement to the House once he has had time to consider the matter in full.

Stephen Timms: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I am pleased to see the Home Secretary in his place. I congratulate him on achieving one year in his role today. On his first day in the post, I asked him to take a careful look at this issue, and he said that he would. On 1 April this year, I asked him for an update. He said:

“We had a further meeting to make some final decisions just last week, and I will be in touch with him shortly.”—[Official Report, 1 April 2019: Vol. 657, c. 799.]

But in the month since, nothing has been announced. Many students face desperate hardship and need urgently to know the decision, because their future depends on it.

As the Minister said, the Home Office cancelled the visas of those who ETS claimed, from its analysis, had definitely cheated. The claim by ETS that almost 97% of those who sat their test had cheated seems completely implausible, but we will let that pass. Colleges had to expel those who had their visas cancelled. By the end of 2016, there had been more than 35,870 refusal, curtailment and removal decisions in ETS cases and more than 4,600 removals and departures. One estimate is that at least 2,000 of those denied visas are still in the UK.

In-country appeals were not allowed, but some have got cases to court. A growing number have convinced the courts that they did not cheat. One showed that he never actually took a TOEIC test, yet he had his visa cancelled because it was alleged that he had cheated in one. It has proved extraordinarily hard for students to obtain from ETS the recordings said to be of them taking the test. One computer expert told the Appeal Court that ETS’s evidence is worthless. The Appeal Court has criticised the Home Office’s evidence and said in 2017 that it was unlawful to force students to leave the country in order to appeal. Many of those affected speak excellent English so had no motive at all to pay someone else to take the test for them.

Thrown off their courses and denied any refund of their fees, the students cannot study or work. Some invested their families’ life savings to obtain a British degree. The savings have gone. They have no qualification and no income. They depend on kindly friends but say they could not endure the shame of going home with nothing, having apparently been convicted of cheating in the UK. Understandably, mental health problems are rife. Does the Minister agree that those who lost their visas on TOEIC grounds but remain in the UK should have the opportunity to sit a new test and, if they pass, obtain a visa in order to complete their studies and clear their names?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I will return at the outset to the comments I made about the National Audit Office report, which is expected to be published next month. The Home Office has been working closely with the NAO to provide information and evidence, and it is right that the Home Secretary has the opportunity to reflect on the report, consider its findings and come back to the House with a statement.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about the court cases that have happened. Under the appeals framework, which is set by Parliament, and the Immigration Act 2014, there are no in-country appeals in the student route, through which these visas were issued, but the Home Office is taking a pragmatic approach. It is important to reflect that we are talking about fraud perpetrated back in 2014, and many people who have ongoing ETS litigation will potentially now have the right to bring a
human rights claim. If they are refused under the human rights route, they will then generally have an in-country right of appeal.

There were an enormous number of cases where fraud was found, and matching showed that a number of individuals had taken repeat tests on behalf of thousands of people. There was a criminal trial at the start of this month, which saw a further five convictions. While I appreciate the strongly held beliefs of the right hon. Gentleman, it is important that we reflect that this was fraud on an industrial scale, and we should react responsibly.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I declare an interest, as chair of the all-party parliamentary BBC group, because it was the BBC’s “Panorama” exposé that showed shocking examples of people reading out answers to those sitting the exams. As the Minister said, people have been convicted of fraud. While I have every sympathy with the individual cases, can the Minister ensure that we take very seriously the fact that our international standing as a centre for students will be harmed if we do not root out those who do wrong?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend will be reassured to learn that 400 colleges that had sponsored students linked to ETS already had their licences revoked before the BBC “Panorama” programme. I am conscious that the student route was linked to wide-scale abuse, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister acted swiftly when the student route was linked to widespread abuse, and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has been raising the issue in Parliament for over a year, and students have been protesting outside Parliament. The Home Secretary told Parliament a year ago that he had incorrect results. What we know, and what the evidence shows, is that our response back in 2014 was driven by systematic fraud that was perpetrated in colleges and has seen significant criminal convictions and sentences of 70 years. We are working with the NAO and through the courts. As I said, the Home Office has taken a pragmatic approach to the judicial reviews and appeals coming through the courts, recognising that many of these individuals have been in the country for a significant period. Of course, the ability to speak English in 2019 does not necessarily mean that an individual did not cheat in 2014 or could speak English to the required level then.

I would like to comment more on what we are doing for international students. The UK has a proud track record of attracting an increasing number of students to this country. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the commitment in the White Paper to continue to have no cap on the number of foreign students coming here and to make a more generous offer for post-study work arrangements for students who choose to come here. It is important that we support our world-class institutions and celebrate the fact that we have five British universities in the top 20 universities globally, and that we saw over the course of the past year a 10% increase in the number of tier 4 visas being applied for.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman has chosen to focus on a very small number of students who may have had incorrect results. What we know, and what the evidence shows, is that our response back in 2014 was driven by systematic fraud that was perpetrated in colleges and has seen significant criminal convictions and sentences of 70 years. We are working with the NAO and through the courts. As I said, the Home Office has taken a pragmatic approach to the judicial reviews and appeals coming through the courts, recognising that many of these individuals have been in the country for a significant period. Of course, the ability to speak English in 2019 does not necessarily mean that an individual did not cheat in 2014 or could speak English to the required level then.

I would like to comment more on what we are doing for international students. The UK has a proud track record of attracting an increasing number of students to this country. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the commitment in the White Paper to continue to have no cap on the number of foreign students coming here and to make a more generous offer for post-study work arrangements for students who choose to come here. It is important that we support our world-class institutions and celebrate the fact that we have five British universities in the top 20 universities globally, and that we saw over the course of the past year a 10% increase in the number of tier 4 visas being applied for.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I was pleased recently to go on a visit to China with the all-party China group, and we met many students there. The dream of many of those students was to come to the UK to go to university. It is therefore absolutely right that we tackle any fraud, and I am pleased by and thank the Minister for the way that she is dealing with this. We have to give clear signals that our world-leading education remains world-leading and that we have an open door for international students to come here to take advantage of that supreme education.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the brilliance of UK universities. I would like to point to the increasing numbers of Chinese and Indian students at the university in my constituency, Southampton, which has done a brilliant job of attracting students from overseas, as indeed have many other institutions countrywide. We do ourselves a disservice if we turn a blind eye to abuse and fraud within the student route. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister,
when she was Home Secretary, took strong action in 2014 to close down bogus colleges, and she was absolutely right to do so.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): First, I give my sincere congratulations to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) not only on securing this urgent question but on the manner in which he has relentlessly pursued this issue, which is finally getting the attention it has long deserved. For far, far too many people, this episode represents an absolute travesty of justice. When the Home Office discovered that ETS had completely failed to prevent widespread cheating—indeed, that some ETS staff were actively involved in facilitating it—it should have sacked the company and sought compensation from it. Instead, unbelievably, the Home Office asked ETS to mark its own dodgy homework and re-check the tests. How can that possibly be justified? The Minister referred to evidence, but in fact we are talking about the totally opaque say-so of ETS, on which basis the Home Office decided that thousands of students were guilty, and their lives were subsequently ruined. There is an abundance of evidence that a large number were totally innocent. They deserve an apology, and much more than that. Will she, at the very least, reverse the draconian repeal of in-country appeal rights that deprived many of justice? Will she agree to all that cross-party MPs have been demanding, including, as the right hon. Gentleman said, new tests and restored visas for those who pass, because that is the bare minimum that needs to be done to right this wrong?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will of course be aware of the expert report by Professor Peter French that concluded that false matches were likely to be very small—in the region of 1%—and more likely to give people the benefit of the doubt than to falsely flag people as having cheated. The courts have always said, even when finding against the Home Office on individual facts of a case, that the evidence was sufficient to make accusations of fraud. Of course he will recall from our exchanges during the passage through Committee of the Immigration Bill that this company was suspended from the immigration rules in July of that year and that the Home Office did take legal action against ETS in a case that was settled last year.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The National Audit Office said that up to 50,000 apparent students came to the UK to work, not study, under the Labour Government back in 2009-10, so obviously action needed to be taken to stamp out abuse. I appreciate the Minister’s tone in being willing to listen to the current concerns. Can she assure me that the UK will continue to be open to genuine international students and that we will not put a cap on the numbers who can come here? [Interruption.]

Caroline Nokes: As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary just said from a sedentary position, “More open”. Those words are included in the immigration White Paper that was published in December last year. We indicated that there would be no cap on international students and that we wished to make the post-study work regime more generous. However, it is important to reflect that this was about systematic fraud being perpetrated. We took action to stop it then. We must continue to be robust in making sure that we have high standards and requirements for English language testing—that is very important. I absolutely agree that we must celebrate the success of our universities and continue to work hard to attract international students.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the NAO investigation into this issue. I sense from the Minister’s tone that, while she obviously cannot anticipate the NAO’s report, she is expecting it to raise questions about decision making in individual cases. In that light, may I ask whether she and the Home Office are now looking much more widely at some of the issues that have been persistently raised about the inaccuracy of Home Office decision making in very important immigration cases? What is being done to address some of the cultural problems that have been raised time and again about these decisions, which have such a huge impact on people’s lives and have to be right?

Caroline Nokes: It would be wrong to prejudge the NAO report, but I would like to reassure the right hon. Lady that Home Office officials have worked closely with the NAO, providing it with information and evidence where requested. As she will know, we are conducting a number of reviews in the Home Office, including, following Windrush, the Wendy Williams lessons learned review, and the forward-looking borders, immigration and citizenship services review. Every day in the job as Immigration Minister, one sees individual cases of people who are impacted by our policies and our rules. It is important that we reflect very closely on that and make sure that we have a review of our BICS system that provides the human face of the Home Office that both the Home Secretary and I are very keen to ensure is seen.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): International students coming to this country are a vital source of our soft power because they are friendly disposed to the United Kingdom after they have studied here and returned home. However, it is clearly important that those people can speak English before they arrive. What message is my right hon. Friend taking to the British Council and other institutions that work abroad to encourage young people to learn English before they come to this country so that they can satisfy the tests and fulfil their destiny?

Caroline Nokes: It is really important that this is a matter not simply for the Home Office but for the Foreign Office and for Government Departments across the whole piece. We want to encourage foreign students to come here to study at our world-class institutions because we know that when they return home after a period of study they take fond memories with them and have a relationship with the UK that lasts throughout the rest of their lives. It is therefore important that we continue to work to promote our great universities. As part of that, there are a number of campaigns, including the GREAT campaign, which does fantastic work promoting the benefits of study in the UK. It is important that that should be a joint piece of work with the Home Office, the Foreign Office and the Department for Business,
Energy and Industrial Strategy to make sure that we continue to promote the UK as a brilliant place to study.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I echo the very decent sentiments that have been expressed by Members in all parts of the House regarding our horror for the innocent students who are caught up in this trap. I have been here for two years and I am not an expert in home affairs, but there does seem to be a bit of a case history with the Home Office. We have had misfortunes and carelessness, and now we have this. Is now not the time for the Government to seriously consider taking responsibility for immigration, and all we are talking about today, and putting it into a separate Government Department where Ministers can concentrate solely on that?

Caroline Nokes: It is important to reflect that this was a fraud perpetrated in 2014. It is not new. The Government responded then to a systematic fraud, took action and we have seen criminal convictions as a result. However, the hon. Gentleman has made an interesting suggestion about the future of the immigration directorate within the Home Office. Unfortunately, the Home Secretary left moments before he made that point, but I am certain that it will not be lost on him.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What happened to some members of the Windrush generation, through no fault of their own, was simply inexcusable, but at the root of these cases is a fraud that was conducted on a quite industrial scale. Is it not hugely insulting to members of the Windrush generation to try to draw a parallel between the two cases?

Caroline Nokes: I certainly would not draw a parallel. This was criminal behaviour and there have been significant sentences imposed on those who were perpetrating the fraud. Indeed, there are ongoing criminal investigations whereby we may yet see more convictions. It is important that we take stock of this and that we reflect on the NAO report when it is published and made available to us. As I have said, the Home Secretary will come to the House and make a full statement when we have the NAO findings. He continues, and indeed I continue, to review this situation and work out what is the best way forward.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): There is no doubt that we are concerned not about those who have committed crimes but about the innocent people who have been caught up in this. If the Government were so confident in ETS, they would not have stopped using ETS. In that context, what financial settlement was reached between the Home Office and ETS after its licence was revoked?

Caroline Nokes: As I mentioned earlier, the licence was revoked in July 2014, and the Home Office moved swiftly to revoke that licence. Action was taken against ETS but, because of the commercial sensitivities, I am afraid I cannot divulge details. However, I will ascertain from Home Office lawyers whether I can write to the hon. Lady and let her have that information.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): No one doubts that there was criminal behaviour and cheating, but it has been weeks since we were promised a decision by Ministers, months since we met the Home Secretary to outline concerns about people who had been wrongly implicated, and years during which these students have had their lives left in complete limbo, with them suffering mental ill health, financial hardship, family breakdown and a whole range of other detrimental consequences as a result of being accused of cheating wrongly by the British state. When will the Government finally get their act together? The longer this rolls on, and the longer people are caught up in expensive judicial action or lengthy, bureaucratic immigration appeals, the longer that is wasting their time, wasting their lives and wasting taxpayers’ money. Enough is enough.

Caroline Nokes: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that those who were found to have a questionable result following the ETS investigations were given the opportunity to take a second test to establish their ability to speak English, so they could have taken that option. He was quite aggressive in his questioning, but I must reiterate that I think it is right, and the Home Secretary thinks it is right, to wait for the outcome of the NAO report, which we expect next month.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Nobody is claiming that everybody is innocent. The Minister has quoted legal cases, and those who are guilty deserve everything that they get. However, the Home Office has also lost judgments in the courts. ETS evidence is quoted by the Minister, but that evidence has been challenged and undermined, and now we have a National Audit Office inquiry. Will the Minister confirm that she believes and accepts that there are some innocent students caught up in this mess?

Caroline Nokes: It is important to note that there have been a number of legal cases where students have challenged the decision through judicial review and subsequent immigration appeals. Some of those cases have been upheld by the courts, but not in all instances was that because those people were not thought to have cheated in the test; it was actually because they had been in the UK for such a long time that they had an established article 8 human rights claim to be here, and the Home Office is taking a pragmatic approach to those cases. However, I am very conscious that we have legislation that requires there to be no in-country right of appeal under the student route, and these people were here under the student route. It is right that we wait for the NAO findings, that we reflect on those and that we find a way forward.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): One of my constituents, who had been in the UK since 2005, was detained in Dungavel for 10 days because the Home Office claimed she had overstayed and had used deception in her TOEIC test. Neither of those things was true. The first tier tribunal found in her favour; the Home Office appealed, and the appeal was thrown out. It appealed to the upper tier tribunal, but the appeal was then withdrawn. My constituent has been fighting the Home Office for five years. Will the Minister apologise to her and let her and her three-year-old daughter get on with their lives?

Caroline Nokes: Unfortunately, the hon. Lady has not provided any information, and I cannot comment on an individual case on the Floor of the House, but if she cares to write to me about the case, I will look at it.
Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on raising this issue and pursuing it so strongly. People’s lives have been put in limbo. Since 2014, my constituent Mr Muhammad Arsalan has not been able to work, study or get access to the NHS. That is not because he has been found guilty based on any evidence, but because he has been found guilty by association. If people have cheated, they should face the full force of the law. However, my constituent has not been able to appeal, because he is in country. Yes, he can now challenge on human rights grounds, but that takes time and money. Will the Minister therefore look at the suggestion from my right hon. Friend that, dependent on the outcome of the current investigation, she consider the idea of these people being allowed to sit another test to prove that they are competent in English?

Caroline Nokes: As I have said, we are going to wait for the findings of the NAO. However, it is important to confirm that the Home Office is looking at a range of options as to how we can find a way forward from this situation. The Home Secretary has been pleased to meet a number of Members on this subject. It is a recurring subject of parliamentary questions and Westminster Hall debates. We are looking at it closely, and I hope we will find a way forward when we have had a chance to reflect on the NAO findings.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister rightly talks about the importance of international students, but she will know that our market share fell from 12% in 2010 to 8% in 2016. We are falling behind competitor countries because of reputational damage, and that reputational damage has been added to by people being treated wrongly in this case. Will the Minister therefore tell the House what she will do to restore our reputation and to address some of the concerns about policy issues that have led international students to choose other countries over Britain?

Caroline Nokes: It is important to reflect that overall numbers are up—indeed, they are up 10% in higher education institutions in the last year alone. Of course we want to make sure that the UK can still provide a good and attractive offer to students. I commend to the hon. Gentleman the White Paper published in December, which sets out some of the ways we plan to make that possible.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Yesterday, we had an urgent question about tuition fees for EU nationals post Brexit. Can the Minister confirm whether EU nationals will be required to sit the TOEIC test post Brexit?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. At the current time, there have not been any policy decisions that I am aware of with regard to the English language test. However, it is important—and we have said very clearly in our White Paper—that we will have a single, global system for immigration, where people from all countries will be treated equally.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing this question, and I welcome the NAO’s investigation into this issue. I have no doubt that there was systematic cheating, but I seriously doubt the scale—the ETS figures show that only 3.5% of the people who sat the test did not cheat, which seems incredible. What assessment has been made of the number of people whose visas were revoked who are still in the UK, and what would the cost be of allowing them to sit a new English test?

Caroline Nokes: I made the point earlier that evidence of ability to speak English now does not provide evidence of ability to speak English back in 2014. What the courts have consistently found is that the evidence we had in 2014 was sufficient to make accusations of fraud. This was wide-scale, and we saw enormous numbers of proxy tests being taken on behalf of individuals for a wide variety of reasons. The Government acted swiftly to clamp down on bogus colleges and to revoke the licence of ETS. However, it is important that we reflect on the situation of those who remain in this country and, as I have said, the Home Office has taken a pragmatic approach when looking at the article 8 claims of individuals who have been caught up in the TOEIC issue.
Social Media and Health

1.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I would like to update the House on yesterday’s social media summit and the progress we have made on tackling online harms to health. We called this summit to bring together the principal social media companies, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Google and others, as well as the Samaritans and the eating disorder charity Beat. It was the second such meeting I have held, along with the Education Secretary and the Minister for suicide prevention, on how we can protect people—particularly children—from online content that promotes eating disorders and self-harm and suicide, as well as on how we address the growing problem of anti-vaccination misinformation.

Social media companies have a duty of care to people on their sites. Just because they are global, it does not mean that they can be irresponsible. We have been resolute that we will act to keep the internet safe, especially for children, and I am grateful to the companies for their engagement.

We have all seen and heard about tragic cases of vulnerable children turning to self-harm and even taking their own lives after accessing graphic images online that promote and even encourage suicide and self-harm. In the same way, we know that online content on eating disorders can be extremely harmful to vulnerable children and young adults. I have met the parents of children, brought up in loving homes, who had no idea of the dangers that their child was being exposed to on their smartphone or tablet while they were supposed to be safe at home. We all know of parents whose children have been affected, and for all of us this is very close to home.

We must do everything we can to keep our children safe online, so I am pleased to inform the House that, as a result of yesterday’s summit, the leading global social media companies have agreed to work with experts from the Samaritans to speed up the identification and removal of suicide and self-harm content, and to create greater protections online. They will not only financially support the Samaritans to do the work; crucially, suicide prevention experts from the Samaritans will determine what content is harmful and dangerous, and the social media platforms committed to either removing it or preventing others from seeing it, and to helping vulnerable people get the positive support they need.

The mainstream media already have well-established codes of practice and training for removing material that promotes suicide and self-harm. In my experience, the British media act with great responsibility on the matter, and it is time that social media companies did the same. This partnership marks, for the first time globally, a collective commitment to act, to build knowledge through research and insights, and to implement real changes that ultimately will save lives.

The social media companies also gave us an update on the actions they have already taken. Following the first summit in February, Instagram now has a policy globally of removing all graphic self-harm imagery, and other sites have also taken action, but there is much more to do and more content to remove. Importantly, the commitments that the companies made at yesterday’s summit are what the Samaritans asked for, and they are a positive step forward. The progress that we have made so far shows that we can effect positive change, but I know that the House feels strongly that just because these companies are global does not mean that we as a House cannot determine society’s rules and expectations. On this we are prepared to act too.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport recently published the online harms White Paper, which sets out the proposed regulatory framework for addressing online harms. It sets out a new statutory duty of care to require companies to take more responsibility for the safety of their users and tackle harm caused by content or activity on their services. Compliance with this duty of care will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator, which will be responsible for producing codes of practice that will explain what companies need to do to fulfil their duty, and the robust action they need to take to remove illegal or harmful content. The White Paper also proposes the sharing of information, research and best practice to improve the understanding of harmful content across the industry.

The summit also allowed us to discuss how we can work together to tackle another online danger: the spread of anti-vaccination misinformation. Since Edward Jenner’s discovery, vaccination has saved hundreds of millions of lives around the world. Few innovations have reduced human misery so much. After clean water, vaccination has prevented more deaths and disease than anything else in human history. The science is settled: vaccination saves lives. It protects not only our children but other vulnerable people who cannot do anything about it themselves. Failure to vaccinate puts their lives at risk. The rise of social media now makes it easier to spread lies about vaccination, so there is a special responsibility on social media companies to act.

Coverage for the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine in England decreased for the fourth year in a row last year, to 91%. There was a steep rise in confirmed measles cases last year, from 259 to 966. We forget that measles is a horrible disease. We have one of the most well-documented problems in America and on the continent are worse than here, but we are determined to get ahead of the problem, because failure to vaccinate has real and devastating consequences. Our action to promote vaccines is not limited to removing anti-vaccination misinformation online; we are promoting the objective facts about the importance of vaccination and increasing funding to primary care to improve access, and our prevention Green Paper will set out further actions.

Social media can be a great force for good and can help us promote positive messages, but it is the responsibility of us all to ensure that this new technology, with all its great potential and power, is moulded to the benefit of society. We will not nuck this challenge. I commend this statement to the House.

1.25 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. These social media platforms must be made to take responsibility for the harm caused by the
dangerous fake news they host, because they are helping to fuel a public health crisis. He talks about the actions that platforms such as Instagram have taken since February, but I have just searched on Instagram and found images and videos of graphic self-harm; there are 8 million posts with the hashtag #suicide—from a quick glance, many are distressing—226,000 posts with the hashtag #killmyself, and 249,000 posts with the hashtag #selfinjury. I found similar pro-anorexia posts and the normalisation of eating disorders. I am sorry to have to share those examples with the House, but I think that we have to understand the scale of the challenge we face. As the father of two beautiful daughters, aged seven and five, I would be devastated if they saw such posts as they grow up.

Dangerous content should be blocked and taken down. I look forward to the Samaritans’ recommendations, so can the Secretary of State update us on the timescale? He talked about the online harms White Paper, but we need action immediately, so can he tell us when the proposed legislation will come before the House? When will the new regulator and duty of care be enforced? Can he guarantee that there will be criminal sentences for executives for serious breaches? In what circumstances would the maximum fine of 4% of global turnover be applied? If, God forbid, something similar to what happened to Molly Russell—I am sure that the whole House will want to praise her father for his brave campaigning—should happen to another child, what action would be taken against the social media companies?

I have also been able to find dangerous anti-vaccination propaganda on platforms such as Facebook, at a time when measles outbreaks are on the increase across Europe and the United States and in parts of the United Kingdom. Unvaccinated children are being turned away from schools in parts of Italy and banned from public areas in parts of New York. I would hate to see that happen here. UNICEF has warned that more than half a million children have missed their measles vaccination, which means the UK now has the third-worst ranking of all high-income countries. As the Secretary of State said, take-up of the MMR vaccine has now declined for the fourth year in a row, making coverage for the vaccine the lowest it has been since 2011-12.

I know that the Secretary of State said on the radio last week that he was considering banning unvaccinated children from schools in England, but we urgently need a clear vaccination action plan from the Government. This cannot be about penalising families. Yes, we need intervention with social media platforms when the legislation is in place, but while we wait for the legislation will he consider instructing Public Health England to launch an online social media campaign, on the platforms that are currently sharing anti-vaccination propaganda, to challenge those dangerous myths?

Will the Secretary of State also accept that our falling vaccination rates are not just about online activity? Public health services have been cut by £800 million. Our health visitors have been cut by 8% in recent years, and our school nurses by 24%. General practice has faced a funding squeeze, and GP numbers are down by 1,000 since 2015. At the same time, 2018-19 marks the first year that we have seen a reversal in the percentage of children receiving vital health check-ups on time since the measurement of these figures began: 14.5% of children are not receiving a six to eight-week review on time; 24% are not receiving a 12-month review on time; and the number of mothers over 28 weeks pregnant receiving their first face-to-face antenatal contact with a health visitor has fallen for the second year in a row. Will he therefore commit today to reversing public health cuts and restoring health visitor numbers, and will he invest in general practice so that we can meet the 95% national vaccination coverage rate, as recommended by the World Health Organisation? When does he expect us to meet that 95% rate?

Children are 20% of our population but 100% of our future. We must always put their health and wellbeing first. Yes, there has been some progress, but we need further action from the Government today.

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who has provided leadership on this agenda from his position as shadow Secretary of State. I am glad, listening to his response, that we agree very broadly on the direction we need to take. The agreement across the House is valuable in demonstrating to social media companies the clear consensus on the need for them to act, and to every parent in the land the importance of vaccination. That cross-party support is very, very valuable.

I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Ian Russell, the father of Molly Russell, whom the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), the Minister for suicide prevention, met this morning. He has been brave and eloquent in bringing these issues to light. I pay tribute to him and thank him for how he has spoken about what needs to be done. I know he is as determined as we are to ensure that action translates into saving more lives.

We agreed, after the meeting yesterday, to reconvene in two months’ time, by which time I expect further action from the social media companies. As I said in my statement, we have already seen some progress. I am glad that some of the global algorithms and global terms and conditions have been changed as a result of action taken by the UK Government. It is very important that we keep the pace up. In two months’ time, we expect to see further action from the social media companies and progress by the Samaritans on being able to define more clearly the boundary between harmful and non-harmful content. In each area of removing harms online, the challenge is to create the right boundary in the appropriate place. It is the challenge when tackling terrorist and child abuse material online, so that social media companies do not have to define what is and is not socially acceptable, but we as society do. I am delighted that the Samaritans will formally play that role on material relating to suicide prevention and self-harm, and that Beat will do so on material relating to eating disorders.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the online harms White Paper. We are currently in the middle of a 12-week consultation. I hope he and everybody listening to this who has an interest will respond to it. We are clear that we will have a regulator, but we also genuinely want to consult widely. This is not really an issue of party politics, but of getting it right so that society decides on how we should govern the internet, rather than the big internet companies making those decisions for themselves.
I have to say that the tone from the social media companies has changed in recent months and years, but they still need to do an awful lot. I look forward to working with him and others across the House to ensure we can deliver on this agenda.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s work on this issue. Will he comment on stand-alone posts, tweets or messages which on their own do not seem that intimidating or threatening, but which have a cumulative effect that is nothing short of bullying, harassment and intimidation that can cause mental health problems for many of our young people? Will he ask social media companies to not just look at single posts, but at the cumulative effect of people trying to intimidate others?

Matt Hancock: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, the cumulative effect of posts on mental health, in particular eating disorders, came up in the discussion yesterday. We have to look at what the social media companies call the density of content—I think my hon. Friend put it rather better as the cumulative impact of lots of different posts. Social media companies’ algorithms are powerful enough to understand that and pick up on it. We need rules in place so that action can be taken when it is spotted by those algorithms.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I too welcome the statement, the two summits that have already been held and, in particular, the announcement of funding to Samaritans. However, the scale of the task is absolutely huge. The scale of the donation to Samaritans is actually quite small by comparison both with that and with the profits the companies make. They are expected to make profits of £50 billion just this year. It is important to talk about preventing the promotion of eating disorders, self-harm and suicide, and I welcome that approach.

As chair of the all-party group on vaccinations for all, I particularly welcome, in World Immunisation Week, the Secretary of State talking about anti-vaccination. As the shadow Secretary of State said, the drop in vaccination. Their lives are directly threatened by a parent who chooses not to vaccinate. We need to be very clear with the public about the consequences not only for their children but, even worse, for vulnerable children and adults who, maybe because they are immunosuppressed or very young, cannot have the vaccination. Their lives are directly threatened by a parent who chooses not to vaccinate. We need to be very clear and stark about that.

The hon. Lady mentions that the social media companies have contributed to Samaritans. That was Samaritans’ ask for this stage of putting together the organisation and experts it needs to provide clarity on the boundary of what is and is not acceptable in this space. I would, of course, be perfectly prepared to go and ask for more if more is needed. What is more, we are bringing forward a digital services tax. Historically, the global tax system has not worked well in taxing such companies fairly, because of the nature of how they make their money. We have worked for years to try to get a global consensus on how to tax them. We are now clear that we will bring forward the tax next year in the UK, regardless of whether we can get global consensus.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I applaud the Secretary of State for taking this initiative, and I certainly endorse the comments about the good of vaccination. However, I hope that the warm words of the social media companies that he recounted are matched by actions, because I am afraid that that is not the experience of the Home Affairs Committee, which again saw a woeful performance from the Facebook, Twitter and YouTube representatives who appeared before us last week.

Is the Secretary of State aware that it is not only a question of taking down or not allowing content on which those companies are not doing their job properly, but of the algorithms that they use actively promoting more extreme versions of what people may be searching for, whether that is material on the extreme right wing, terrorism, radicalisation or self-harm? Is he convinced that those companies will actually put their considerable resources into making sure that those companies will actually put their considerable money where he thinks their mouths are and make sure that serious interventions are made to stop this stuff being promoted to some of our most vulnerable citizens?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is a man after my own heart on this. Am I convinced? I am convinced that social media companies have committed to it, and it is our job to keep them to those commitments. That is why I have pushed for a long time for a statutory regulator in this space, and I am delighted that the Government are bringing one forward.
For years, we in the House asked social media companies to do something, and there was an argument that, because they are global, we cannot really impact how their algorithms work. That is just rubbish. We are the legislators for this country—we set the rules, and we have a big role in setting the norms and expectations of what happens here. Just because a platform is global does not mean that it can be outside the rule of law of this country, so we will legislate in this space, and there will be a regulator that will be able precisely to keep track of those commitments and make sure that they are followed up. Having said that, the last two meetings have been positive, and we have seen changes as a result. What we have not yet seen is all this content being removed, so there is clearly a long way to go.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the work that the Secretary of State is doing. However, following the question of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), a fellow member of the Home Affairs Committee, surely it is time to do much more on these algorithms, which push people into more and more extreme behaviour? I heard from a mum whose daughter had suffered from an eating disorder who was still being targeted with dieting videos on Instagram. That material was not too extreme to remove, but it certainly should not have been targeted at her daughter. The mum could get nothing done about it.

Our Select Committee staff set up a new YouTube account and were searching for news or politics, but they were increasingly targeted by extreme far-right material promoted by YouTube. Those algorithms push people to extremes—for profit. Surely it is time for much greater transparency and accountability on the entire business model and the way that it promotes all sorts of problems?

Matt Hancock: The short answer is yes. My responsibilities as Health Secretary are to do with the impact on health, especially mental health, and eating disorders and self-harm are part of that. A separate but connected matter is anti-vaccination messages, which are a type of misinformation, or in some cases disinformation—actively pushed false information.

The social media companies say that they are removing this material from being promoted. For instance, graphic self-harm imagery will be taken down from Instagram. Our challenge is to make sure that that is done properly, because ultimately only if social media companies change their algorithms can we make this happen. That is why the new regulator is so important.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s initiative in this area and what he has told the House today. Through my work on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I have been utterly horrified looking at online content relating to bulimia and eating disorders, and to what I describe as extreme online misogyny. That relates to the algorithms that Members have mentioned. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to see inside those companies’ black boxes? Unlike areas such as taxation, in which companies go to the easiest regime, if we set the bar high on online content, they have to comply and put their house in order.

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the work that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has done in this area, both when I was Culture Secretary and since. Its work and the approach it has taken are groundbreaking, and that has played a part in the change in attitudes that we have seen from the social companies, which at least now accept that it is their responsibility, as well as the principle that they have a duty of care to people on their sites.

As my hon. Friend says, there is clearly an awful lot to do to get to where we need to be. If we step back from this whole question, the technology that has brought social media companies is still relatively new; it is only 15 or 20 years old. Around the world, the way in which society has responded to it has not yet matured. The good social media companies now get the fact that they have such an impact on society that a regulatory framework is necessary, and in fact have welcomed the White Paper that we introduced as an approach that could be replicated around the world. My hon. Friend is quite right that, once one country or jurisdiction gets this right, it will be taken as a model elsewhere, so that, ultimately, the power of this amazing new way in which we communicate—by God, Mr Speaker, in this House we all use it—can be for the good, and we can mitigate all the downsides that come with it.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, but for too long internet companies have been too slow to protect children from the risks of suicide and other harms such as online hate and the threat of far-right and religious extremists and terrorists. He will be aware that, internationally, companies such as Facebook have fallen very short and were accused by the United Nations of playing a “determining role” in the genocide in Burma. This is a massive problem, and it is right that Britain should lead the way. Is he speaking to his counterparts in other Departments? Will he make sure that the legislation actually ensures that companies are responsible for content, as well as ensuring that there are strong, large fines if they continue to fail?

Matt Hancock: We have proposed fines as called for by the hon. Lady, and of course this is a cross-Government effort. My responsibilities are the health impacts, but technology has an impact right across the board, including on the quality of debate in our democracy, which is a Cabinet Office issue, and with regard to terrorism content, which is a Home Office issue. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport leads across the board and the Prime Minister herself has led global debates on this. The hon. Lady is quite right to point out that there is a broad range of impacts, and we work together to tackle them.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State referred to the proliferation of pro-anorexia content online. Is the Secretary of State aware that tech giant Amazon, sells books under the category of “pro-ana”, which purports to show anorexia as a healthy lifestyle? Does he share my revulsion that those books are available online, and will he call on Amazon to take this content
Matt Hancock: I will absolutely look at the matter raised by my hon. Friend, as it is alarming and distressing to hear about it. Amazon sells physical goods for the most part and surely has a duty of care to those who buy them, in the same way that a shop has a responsibility for what it sells. My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will follow up. I will write to her with more details.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I, too, welcome the statement by the Secretary of State, not least because I survived measles as a very small child and my family talked for a long time about how worrying and scary it was. On the other issue, as well as taking action against the social media companies, the long-term NHS plan talks about an increase in proportionate spending on child and adult mental health services. What will he do about that? What will the proportion be? I ask because it is crucial to fighting this problem.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there will be an increased spend on mental health services across England—a £2.3 billion increase. It is the fastest-growing area of spend in the long-term plan. We are investing £33.9 billion in the NHS in cash terms, and the fastest proportionate rise in spend is in mental health services. That is an important part of this, although, there is an awful lot that the social media companies can do to reduce the demands on those services by reducing the negative impact on mental health. The whole House can agree that the hon. Lady being alive and here, having survived measles, is another reason why it is important to get this right. It would have been the House’s loss had the measles won.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The drop in vaccination rates is not only an annual problem but a cumulative problem, as more and more young people in society are not immunised against these childhood diseases. Can I urge my right hon. Friend not only to undertake a social media campaign to encourage parents and children to take up the vaccinations, but to target the messages so that people know where they can go to get them, how they can do it and the importance medically of doing so?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is exactly right; in fact, that work is under way. I should have mentioned in response to the shadow Secretary of State that Public Health England has a targeted programme of positive information. We can use data and social media better to target messages at those who need them in exactly the way that he proposes. That work is in hand.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and the consultation. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and the suicide prevention Minister for taking part in the launch of my all-party parliamentary group report on new filters and the impact of social media on young people’s mental health. I am also grateful to the Secretary of State for agreeing to have a meeting with me next week to discuss the content of the report. One thing that is not in the consultation and which has not been mentioned today is the idea of a social media-health alliance bringing together social media companies and other groups—not just groups such as the Samaritans but young people’s groups and social work groups—that can formulate, collate and undertake more research into the impact of social media on young people. Would he consider this idea and even take a lead in forming it, as his Department does with gambling and other compulsive disorders?

Matt Hancock: I will certainly consider it and I look forward to talking to the hon. Gentleman about the idea more next week. Dialogue in this area is critical, but we should not only have dialogue; we also need concrete legislative action, but I am grateful for what he has said about the work that has been done. I am glad that he is also working in this area, and I look forward to discussing it with him more.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Three million of the four million videos taken down by YouTube in the last six months were identified and removed by artificial intelligence. What greater role does the Secretary of State see for technological development in helping to reduce online harm and keep people safe online?

Matt Hancock: Artificial intelligence clearly has a role in identifying material that needs to be removed in the same way that it is now being used to remove terrorist content. We are talking to companies that may be able to do this, but we also need to identify what material should be taken down and what should be left up. Defining that boundary is critical to training artificial intelligence to do its job, hence the importance of the decision to ask the Samaritans to do the work of identifying the boundary so that we can train artificial intelligence to identify what needs to be taken down.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) rose—

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My tactic of wearing a dress so big I can hide a colleague behind it is working.

Will the Secretary of State look at the harm that celebrity endorsements on social media can do to young people? The Empowered Woman project in Scotland highlighted how Marnie Simpson of “Geordie Shore” had been plugging Thermosyn diet pills, which are marketed as “skinny caffeine”. When I asked the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about that, he said that the UK Government were looking at “user-generated content, not necessarily commercial activities”—[Official Report, 8 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 73]. Celebrity endorsement veers into the commercial area, however, and has a very significant effect on young people in terms of body image and eating disorders.

Matt Hancock: My colleague the suicide prevention Minister is looking at this area, particularly endorsements of cosmetics, and I am sure she would be very happy to talk to the hon. Lady.
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My generation growing up might have feared bullying in the playground, but largely home was a refuge and place of safety. The problem for the current generation is that they can find themselves being bullied 24/7 because of social media. It is little wonder that when I contacted Twitter after seeing some rather libellous material it told me that in its view it was not abusive, even though it was against the law in this country. Does the Secretary of State agree that until social media companies understand that they have to operate under the norms and laws of this country, and not just abide by Californian norms, they will never reform?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend puts it exactly right. That is what the duty of care is all about. The argument—we hear it less and less, to be honest—that these are international companies and so will abide by somebody else’s laws, thanks very much, is wrong and out of date, as the online harms White Paper makes clear. We must establish a proper enforcement mechanism to ensure that it is the rules that this House sets—occasionally amended by the other place—that define the law of the land and that we do not have a wild west. This action to protect people’s health is just one part of the response needed to make the internet safe, especially for children.

Carol Monaghan: Thank you for calling me so early, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.] It couldn’t be any worse.

My son contracted measles one month before he was due to receive his MMR vaccine because of a dip in numbers being vaccinated, so I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s statement about tackling anti-vaccination posts on social media. Last year, the Select Committee on Science and Technology carried out an inquiry into the impact of social media on young people’s health, and one of the statistics presented to us was quite disturbing: 50% of young people between the ages of 11 and 16 had seen pornographic images, and many of them had stumbled across them. When I spoke to my 11-year-old daughter, she confirmed that she had seen images that upset her but had been too scared to speak to me about it. What is the Secretary of State doing to alert parents to the dangers of social media and to give them guidance on how to speak to their children and identify when they might have seen things online that have upset them?

Matt Hancock: Mr Speaker, that question was so good it is only a pity it was not asked earlier in our exchanges.

I want to address two important points. First, the hon. Lady’s son is a case in point of how, if parents do not vaccinate, they endanger not only their own children but other people’s. It is because of a failure to vaccinate that these diseases still exist, and it is children who are too young to be vaccinated who are at risk. She has made the case more powerfully than anybody for the importance of vaccinating and keeping vaccination rates up, and I am grateful to her for sharing that personal experience. On the second point, she is quite right that we all have a responsibility to act, and act we will.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a privilege to have the last word.

The whole House is concerned about the effect that the internet can have on young people’s mental health, and I welcome the action that the Secretary of State is taking. Is there truth and accuracy in the reports that Wikipedia did not attend yesterday’s summit? If so, does he share my disappointment, and does he feel that Wikipedia must take this issue seriously and engage with it?

Matt Hancock: Unfortunately, those reports are true. I share my hon. Friend’s disappointment that Wikipedia did not attend either of the two summits, despite having been invited. At yesterday’s summit, we agreed that we would get in touch with Wikipedia in robust terms, because it is not acceptable for it to shirk its social responsibilities either.

If I may say so, I think that the statement and the responses to it have shown that there is unanimity in the House. Every speaker has mentioned the need to tackle anti-vaccination misinformation and the social media organisations’ responsibility and duty of care in relation to the health—mental and otherwise—of people on their platforms. The House speaks with one voice, and the social media companies, and the internet companies that have not yet engaged should listen.
Point of Order

2.1 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In 2017, the Department for Work and Pensions changed the wording of the ESA65B letters to GPs, wrongly informing them that they no longer needed to provide fit notes for ill and disabled patients who had been found to be “fit for work”. On 18 March this year, in response to an oral question from me, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that the letter had been “cleared by both the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners.”—[Official Report, 18 March 2019, Vol. 656, c. 769.]

However, letters published yesterday by the BMA and the RCGP state that they do not have the authority to clear, approve or otherwise sign off DWP policies.

The “Ministerial Code” clearly states:

“It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity.”

I have written to the Secretary of State urging her to come to the House and correct the record. I seek your advice and guidance, Mr Speaker, on how to ensure that that is done promptly.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, and for her courtesy in giving me notice of her intention to raise it.

I have received no indication from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions of an intention to come to the House to say anything about this matter. It is, of course, incumbent on each and every Member to take responsibility for words spoken in the Chamber—that is to say, for their accuracy. In the event that the Secretary of State feels that it is necessary to correct the record, I expect that will happen. Meanwhile, because I cannot be the arbiter of whether such a correction is required, all I can say is that the hon. Lady has made her point with force and alacrity, and it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench.

Climate Change (Net Zero UK Carbon Account)

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

2.3 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require that the net UK carbon account by the year 2050 is zero.

This Bill would create a legal obligation, the first in any G20 country, for the UK to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Let me be clear: the Bill is radical, and necessarily and unapologetically so. The circumstances of climate change are so serious that nothing less will do. Importantly, however, its central target is achievable.

Climate change is not some future, theoretical possibility; it is a present, practical reality. The five warmest years in recorded history have been since 2010. Here in the UK, Easter Monday was the hottest on record. In January, Australia experienced its warmest month ever, causing power outages after fuses overheated. Glaciers are retreating almost everywhere in the world, from the Alps to the Himalayas. The Ross ice shelf in Antarctica, which covers an area about the size of France, is melting 10 times faster than expected, according to Cambridge University scientists. Last year, wildfires broke out as far north as the Arctic circle. Some Members have seen changes with their own eyes. During a debate earlier this year, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) spoke powerfully of going back to the great barrier reef after 25 years to find magnificent corals bleached and dead.

We can choose to dismiss these events as a coincidence, ignoring the fact that they have taken place alongside soaring levels of greenhouse gases. We can choose the comforting observation that the Earth’s climate has shifted in the past, ignoring the fact that those shifts have tended to happen slowly, over hundreds of thousands of years. Alternatively, we can listen to the overwhelming majority of climate science—to all intents and purposes, a scientific consensus. The conclusions are clear: evidence of humankind’s influence on the climate is compelling and established beyond all reasonable doubt. We therefore need to act.

Although the Bill seeks a new radicalism in the way in which this issue is tackled, it is only right to recognise that it would not be proceeding from a standing start. The United Kingdom has a strong record of global leadership in this regard. That includes the moment when a British Prime Minister and trained scientist, Margaret Thatcher, went to the United Nations and, unequivocally, made a link between human behaviour and environmental harm. She said:

“It is mankind and his activities which are changing the environment of our planet in damaging and dangerous ways.”

She did not retreat behind the convenient excuse that the UK is responsible for only a small fraction of world emissions—about 1%. That would be weak and evasive, and it is not the British way; nor, in fairness, was it the British way under a Labour Government. In 2008, the then Government introduced the Bill that became the world-leading Climate Change Act, which enshrined in law a commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 80% from 1990 levels. That Bill was passed by a huge cross-party majority, with only a handful of objections.
Indeed, since 1990, we have cut our emissions by a full 42% while our economy has grown by two thirds, which means that, on a per capita basis, we have reduced emissions faster while also growing our economy more than any other G7 nation. That is not my verdict, but the verdict of PricewaterhouseCoopers. Last year, a record amount of UK power was generated from renewable sources, with more than 30% coming from renewables and more than 50% from low carbon sources overall. As the sun shone over the Easter weekend, the UK went for 90 hours and 45 minutes without generating any electricity from coal, smashing the previous record of 76 hours. Meanwhile, our country is making huge strides in protecting biodiversity through, for instance, marine conservation zones.

However, despite that strong track record, we know that we have to do so much more if we are to keep control of our climate. Although our current trajectory sets us on course for an 80% reduction in our emissions from 1990 levels by 2050, the science is now clear: if we continue to pump even that remaining 20% of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, it is very likely that climate change will accelerate, and with it global temperatures. Indeed, if we stay on the same path, our children can expect to grow up in a world of surging sea levels, more insecure food supplies, degraded wildlife and destroyed coral reefs. We also risk the deeply alarming prospect of hitting climate tipping points—such as the melting of arctic permafrost and the subsequent release of huge stores of frozen greenhouse gases—which could cause us to lose control of our climate for good.

All this presents a heightened risk of conflict over scarce resources. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) has made the point that one of the biggest future risks to international security is the climate fence around Bangladesh and the possibility of rising waters forcing tens of millions of people up towards the border with Kolkata.

So why 2050? To answer that question, we must recall the Paris climate accord, under which Governments across the world committed themselves to keeping global warming “well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels”, and making efforts to limit it to 1.5°C. However, the special report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, published in October 2018, states that if there is to be a realistic chance of meeting the 1.5°C target, global carbon dioxide emissions will need to reach net zero by about 2050, with net zero for all greenhouse gases reached in future years. The report warns that there are only a dozen years in which to take action. It is time for what some have referred to as “cathedral thinking”. When Sir Christopher Wren started St Paul’s, he did not have a definitive design for every last aspect, and the dome ended up being radically revised as improved building design made a more ambitious design possible. We need to start the project, and then row in behind the target with an ambitious programme of policies on issues ranging from house building standards to transport, agriculture and planting more broad-leaved trees. In due course, the rest of the world will need this technology. Ours can be the country to develop it, perfect it and sell it. This shows the real power of net zero—not just a project of moral necessity, but one of economic renewal, too.

Of course, we cannot do this alone—that is why the UK is bidding to host the vital UN climate change conference in 2020, so that we can leverage our climate leadership—nor will it be easy, but there is the great prize of a healthy planet, teeming with life and echoing to the sounds of rich and vibrant biodiversity; the prize of a society united in a common purpose of preserving environmental education. Their energy and sense of mission is inspiring and uplifting.

Although this Bill was conceived before the Extinction Rebellion protests, those demonstrations were a timely reminder of the growing democratic drumbeat across the generations for the new radicalism about which I have spoken. That has been reflected in this place, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) compiled a letter calling for net zero, which was signed by 191 right hon. and hon. Members.

Importantly, this Bill would create a framework for a project of national economic renewal that is credible and realistic, and one that can generate opportunities for future generations. Unrealistic targets create false hope. The Energy Transitions Commission is a coalition of business, finance and civil society leaders, chaired by the former financial regulator Lord Adair Turner, and its members are drawn from across the spectrum of energy-producing and using industries. In its impressive report, entitled “Mission Possible”, it indicates that it “strongly believes” that the objective of limiting global warming—ideally to 1.5°C, and at the very least below 2°C—by 2050—is achievable in developed economies, so it can be done, and I look forward to reading the conclusions from the Committee on Climate Change report on Thursday.

There is growing enthusiasm from business, too. Tesco and Unilever back the move to net zero. The National Farmers Union is advocating net zero for agriculture by 2040. Vattenfall and ArcelorMittal are building facilities to make emissions-free steel. In cement—a notoriously energy-hungry sector—experts believe that improved building design can reduce total demand by 34%. Hydrogen could potentially be used as a heat source in steel and chemicals production.

British ingenuity from Brunel to Dorothy Hodgkin has placed the UK at the cutting edge of technological advances in science and engineering. We have the talent and the vision, and we need the political will. There are those who say that not all the technology is there yet, and up to a point that is true, but it does not mean we should not start the project.

Of course, we cannot do this alone—that is why the UK is bidding to host the vital UN climate change conference in 2020, so that we can leverage our climate leadership—nor will it be easy, but there is the great prize of a healthy planet, teeming with life and echoing to the sounds of rich and vibrant biodiversity; the prize of a society united in a common purpose of preserving
our environment and holding back climate change; and the prize of an economy at the cutting edge of scientific and manufacturing technology. Let us go for net zero.

2.13 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I think it is important that an alternative point of view should be expressed in this short debate, and that is what I intended to do.

I was one of the Members of this House who voted against the 2008 Climate Change Bill on Third Reading, and I have no regrets whatsoever about having done so. Indeed, the line that those of us who voted against that Bill took has been endorsed in a very important report, issued last year to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the Climate Change Act 2008, in which it was described by Rupert Darwall as “History’s most expensive virtue signal”.

That was obviously an expensive virtue signal, but what my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) is proposing would be an even more expensive and extravagant virtue signal. [Interruption.] It would be well to remind my hon. Friends—some of them are right honourable—of somebody whom I think they held in high esteem. In 2011, the former Member for Tatton the right hon. George Osborne told the Conservative party conference:

“We’re not going to save the planet by putting our country out of business. So let’s at the very least resolve that we’re going to cut our carbon emissions no slower but also no faster than our fellow countries in Europe.”

At the 2017 election, many of my right hon. and hon. Friends were elected, as I was, on the basis of a Conservative party manifesto that promised there would be an inquiry into energy costs. Soon after the election, that inquiry was set up under the auspices of the Government, and the inquiry—the cost of energy review—was carried out by the distinguished Oxford energy economist Dieter Helm. I find it extraordinary that my hon. Friend made no reference whatsoever in his introductory remarks to the contents of the Helm report, let alone to its conclusions.

Dieter Helm supports, as I do, the objective of cutting greenhouse gas emissions, but his overall verdict is one of the most damning to be found in any official report on any Government policy in any field. He concluded that continuing with current policy would perpetuate the crisis mentality of energy sector crises, which, he says, are likely to worsen. The report states that this is “challenging the security of supply, undermining the transition to electric transport, and weakening the delivery of the carbon budgets. It will continue the unnecessary high costs of the British energy system, and as a result perpetuate fuel poverty, weaken industrial competitiveness, and undermine public support for decarbonisation.”

It is extraordinary that although the Government commissioned that report, they have in effect never responded to Professor Helm’s conclusions. It is almost as though there is a collective state of denial about all this. That is why I think it important, before we engage in any more expenditure on virtue signalling, to pause for a moment and think about the need to carry out proper cost-benefit analyses before we implement changes in legislation.

Nothing my hon. Friend said in his opening remarks spelled out the specific benefits that will accrue to people in the United Kingdom, as against elsewhere, as a result of this extraordinary act of self-indulgence, whereby we will unilaterally condemn our economy to problems that no other economy is prepared to suffer. He has not set out at all where the benefits will come from, so we have had neither the costs nor the benefits set out. That is exactly one of the problems there was with the climate change legislation in 2008.

I recognise that I may be in a minority in this House in articulating this view, as indeed I was in 2008, when a number of us voted against the primary legislation, but however emotionally charged this issue is, I do not believe we should ignore our responsibility as legislators to look in a hard-headed way at the costs and benefits that will accrue to our country. I am not going to seek to divide the House on this issue today, because—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very discourteous for Members to witter away from a sedentary position when another point of view is being expressed. The hon. Gentleman might not wish to test the will of the House, but if he wished to do so he would be at liberty so to do. He is entitled to make his speech and to be treated with courtesy by everybody, so those who are not behaving with courtesy ought to reconsider their behaviour.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to you for that intervention, Mr Speaker. I am sure that none of my colleagues needs to be given lessons in how to conduct themselves in this Chamber, because I know that at heart they are all very polite people, but sometimes their emotions get the better of them. I fear that that is what has been happening today.

The reason why I will not seek to divide the House today is that, as a matter of principle, I believe that anybody who wishes to bring in a private Member’s Bill should be free so to do. They should not expect that Bill to go through on the nod when presented to the House, but I see no reason why we should not allow people to bring in private Members’ Bills, and that is what the motion seeks to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham seeks the leave of the House to bring in his Bill, and I certainly do not wish to deny him that right.

While I am speaking, I should like to remind the Government of something. Perhaps this is going to be a Parliament of only one Session, which could go on for two, three, four or five years, but let us remember that during each Session of Parliament, a proportionate number of days should be given over to private Members’ Bills. By extending this Session, seemingly indefinitely, the Government should be under a duty to provide more days on which we can debate the sort of measures that my hon. Friend has brought before the House today. As things stand, his Bill will not be able to be debated in this Session because no other days have been set down for private Members’ business.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Alex Chalk, supported by Zac Goldsmith, Rebecca Pow, Mr Simon Clarke, Richard Benyon, Vicky Ford, Kevin Hollinrake, Sarah Newton, Paul Masterton, Jenny Chapman, Helen Goodman and Tonia Antoniazzi present the Bill.

Alex Chalk accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 384).
2.23 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a
Second time.

This is a small and narrowly drawn, but nonetheless important, Bill. It aims to provide a welcome simplification
of the tax treatment of termination awards and sporting testimonials. The corresponding rules determining the
income tax treatment of termination awards and sporting testimonials were legislated for in the Finance Acts of
2016 and 2017. At that time, it was made clear that we would return and replicate those rules in national insurance
legislation in due course, to ensure that there was not a persistent misalignment. Implementation of the measures
in this Bill will replicate those rules in national insurance legislation. By the nature of national insurance, it is
required to have a separate piece of legislation from the Finance Bill.

These measures were first announced at Budget 2015. They were then consulted on and published in draft in December 2016. They were subsequently reconfirmed at Budget 2018, so it is reasonable to say that they are
expected by those affected and have been subject to much scrutiny. Together, they mean that a 13.8% class 1A employer
national insurance charge will be applied to income derived from termination awards and sporting testimonials
that are already subject to income tax.

Let me first set out the measure that covers termination awards. Between 2013 and 2014, the Office of Tax
Simplification reviewed the tax treatment of employee benefits and expenses. The OTS published an interim
report in August 2013 identifying termination awards as one of a number of priority areas. It found that relatively
few employers and employees properly understood the regime. There was confusion, and the regime was therefore
ripe for reform and simplification.

The OTS specifically identified three areas of misunderstanding on which it recommended we take
action. First, certain forms of termination awards are exempt from employee and employer national insurance
contributions and the first £30,000 is free from income tax. However, there is a common misconception that
the first £30,000 of any termination payment is automatically tax free. Secondly, many employers believe
that this exemption applies where in fact it does not, and thirdly, employers are unaware of the different
income tax and national insurance treatment of termination payments.

Following the OTS recommendations, the Government announced at Budget 2016 that they would be reforming
the tax and national insurance treatment of termination awards. As I said, the reforms to the income tax treatment
of termination awards were legislated for in the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017 and took effect from April 2018. The
Government confirmed at Budget 2018 that the associated reforms to national insurance legislation would be in
place for April 2020. However, the fact that termination awards are currently subject to different income tax and
national insurance treatment has created confusion, and that is what we are attempting to deal with today.

Moreover, the current misalignment incentivises an admittedly small number of well-advised employers to
disguise final payments as compensatory termination awards that benefit from a national insurance charge exemption. These reforms will close that loophole.

The Bill will place a 13.8% class 1A employer national insurance charge on income derived from termination
awards on amounts over £30,000. However, I want to assure hon. Members that, when it comes to employee
national insurance, these payments will remain entirely exempt. We have chosen to continue to ensure that
employees will not face any additional liability as a result of these changes in terms of employee national
insurance. This measure will raise around £200 million per annum for the Exchequer, which will make an
important contribution to our public services. As this is a Budget measure, this sum has already been reflected
by the Office for Budget Responsibility in its projection for the public finances.

Let me turn to the second measure in the Bill, which deals with aligning the employer class 1A national
insurance treatment of income from sporting testimonials with the income tax treatment. As many hon. Members
will be aware, a sporting testimonial is a one-off event—or series of related events—held on behalf of sportspeople
who have played for a certain club for a long time. This often takes the form of an exhibition match involving
famous players from the past and present. The testimonial can be used to raise money for the sportsperson before
retirement, or sometimes to raise money for charity. The relevant income tax changes were debated and
came into force from April 2017. As stated at the time of the Finance Bill—later the Finance Act 2016—the
rules governing sporting testimonials are now changing to give clarity to the national insurance treatment as
well.

Currently, when a sporting testimonial is non-contractual or non-customary, it can be organised by a third party,
rather than the club or employer, to raise money without it being subject to NICs. Where the employer arranges
the testimonial, or if it is part of the contract, or if there was an expectation that the sportsperson would be
entitled to one, the testimonial is already subject to income tax and NICs.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Is there a sense of how common it is for a testimonial to be
contractual? We all know that it is commonplace in cricket and football for players to have testimonials or
similar events, so one assumes that most of them are contractual.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and our analysis is the same. Last year, only around
220 sporting testimonials of any kind took place in the United Kingdom, and a large number will have been
contractual. Certainly, the highest-profile ones, such as those of premiership footballers or leading cricketers
in the United Kingdom, and a large number will have been contractual. Certainly, the highest-profile ones, such as
those of premiership footballers or leading cricketers for significant county clubs, are usually contractual. As
I will go on to say, because the measure has a one-off £100,000 threshold during the career of the sportsperson,
a large number of those 220 testimonials will fall below the threshold. Less high-profile sportspeople, who will
perhaps have lower earnings, are likely to be within the threshold. We are talking about a small number of
relevant testimonials and, as hon. Members will see in the Bill’s accompanying documents, the measure will raise a negligible sum. Our motivation is primarily the simplification of the tax system and the avoidance of double taxation for sportspersons and those advising them, rather than to increase revenue materially.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Minister is making a clear point. I want to speak mainly for the cricketers of Somerset county cricket club, and I declare an interest here, because my husband, who is an auctioneer, has helped to raise money at many of their testimonials. A testimonial can make an important contribution to a player’s salary, especially those who have played for a long time. Will the Minister clarify that the legislation will clear up the situation, which does seem somewhat confusing? We do not want players to feel hard done by, but we have to take the right amount of tax and we must be fair. Will he also clarify that the proposals are fair and that players who may earn less will not be jeopardised?

Robert Jenrick: Yes, and I must also declare an interest as a member of Nottinghamshire county cricket club. We have given the matter a great deal of thought. The proposal was raised several years ago, as I said, and we consulted at that time with the sporting bodies, including the England and Wales Cricket Board. It was my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), then the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who discussed the matter with the sporting bodies. When the proposal was first brought forward, the threshold was £50,000 but, having spoken with the sporting bodies, we made the decision to increase it to £100,000, making it significantly more generous and allaying some of the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) sets out.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Let us hear from Essex county cricket club.

Vicky Ford: I just wanted to declare an interest as a member of Essex county cricket club. I thank the Minister for supporting cricket.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a problem as long as we do not forget the great county of Lancashire. [Laughter.]

Robert Jenrick: Very good. I re-emphasise not only that there is a £100,000 threshold, but that this is about fairness. All sportspersons who have a contractual right to a testimonial, which is commonplace, will have been paying income tax and national insurance on the benefit from that for some time, so this measure merely provides the clearest possible advice will be given for those taking part in testimonials or those on sporting testimonial committees. Sporting bodies and other relevant stakeholders are expecting the changes, because our intention to make them has been known since at least 2015. As the changes required an NICs award measure, we have chosen to act in relation to employer NICs charge on the amount raised above £100,000. These types of testimonials will not be subject to employer NICs, to ensure that the sportsperson is not adversely affected. Again, as with the termination awards measure, we have chosen to act in relation to employer NICs, to ensure that the sportsperson is not adversely affected. Again, as with the termination awards measure, we have chosen to act in relation to employer national insurance contributions, not employee contributions, so there remains a benefit to individuals in that respect.

I reassure hon. Members that the vast majority of sportspersons will be unaffected by the Bill because they will not exceed the £100,000 threshold. As I have said, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs estimates that only around 220 testimonials occur each year, most of which will remain unaffected as they either fall below the £100,000 level or are part of a previous contractual arrangement, which is commonplace in most sports.

Although the measure will bring in negligible revenue—we estimate less than £3 million a year—its value comes in the alignment and simplification of the tax and NICs treatment of sporting testimonials and clarity for those taking part in testimonials or those on sporting testimonial committees. Sporting bodies and other relevant stakeholders are expecting the changes, because our intention to make them has been known since at least 2015. As the changes required an NICs Bill, there has been a short delay, but that is what we are attempting to do today.

In conclusion, it may be a small and narrowly drawn Bill, but it is none the less important and includes two measures that simplify our tax code. Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I would like greater simplification of the tax system, but that journey must begin with single steps, and we are taking one of those today in simplifying the tax code in two significant respects that will have real-world consequences for individuals, who will benefit from a simpler system. The Bill will also raise a significant sum for public services and support our continued efforts to improve the public finances. It brings the national insurance and tax treatment of termination awards and sporting testimonials into closer alignment, and I commend it to the House.

2.37 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The condensed national insurance Bill before us is a shadow of its former self. I would have liked to be able to say that I was bowled over or knocked for six by the Minister’s speech, but there were more own goals than anything else. It is far from the extensive Bill that was promised by the Chancellor’s predecessor at the 2016 Budget, which included the Conservatives’ 2015 manifesto pledge to abolish class 2 national insurance contributions. Instead, that manifesto pledge, like many of the Government’s promises, has quietly been sent to the landfill, barely even being recycled in this five-minute Bill. As for scrutiny, we have not even been able to amend the last three or four Finance Bills, but I am pleased that we will have an evidence session in Committee. I will be grateful for small mercies because we may be able to tease matters out a little more.

The cannibalisation of the national insurance Bill, which has been driven by the Chancellor’s volte-face on a tax cut for 3 million self-employed workers, reflects once again why the Conservative party has long ceased
to be the party of the self-employed in particular and business in general. To many observers this will be viewed as another missed opportunity—one of the many opportunities that this Government has missed—to seriously address the relationship between the growing levels of self-employment in the UK and the levels of taxation and national insurance contributions that are paid.

The rushed timetable of this Bill has shown, once again, the Government’s complete lack of respect for parliamentary convention and the procedures of this House. The Opposition were notified only last Wednesday of the Government’s intention to timetable the Bill’s Second Reading, with an updated version of the Bill published last Thursday. The Government do not know one day from the next, although they do try to live from one day to the next. They gave parliamentary colleagues just one sitting day to examine the content of the Bill before today’s debate. The Government might not take their legislative responsibilities seriously, but the Opposition do.

Of course this is nothing new. Members have become accustomed to the Government’s handling or mishandling, of legislation. The Government are engulfed in chaos and infighting on Brexit, and *The Times* reported yesterday that their rushed introduction of this hollow, some may say vacant, Bill is a further desperate attempt by the Prime Minister to keep this zombie Parliament in session.

Unwilling to face the electorate and unable to bring her dead-in-the-water Brexit deal back to Parliament for the fourth time, the Prime Minister is attempting to pack parliamentary business in the hope of avoiding an early Queen’s Speech that would no doubt be opposed by the Democratic Unionist Party and her own Back Benchers. This is a new embarrassing low for a Government who are all at sea. It is high time that the Prime Minister did the honourable thing and set a date for a general election and her departure. We have a kakistocracy dressed up as a Government.

The Bill is comprised of two key measures: the introduction of a new national insurance contributions charge for employers on the taxable element of termination payments above £30,000, as the Minister set out, and the introduction of a national insurance contributions charge on income from non-contractual sporting testimonials over £100,000.

The new class 1A employer NICs charge will be levied at 13.8%, if I understand it, and its introduction will align the NICs treatment of termination awards and income from non-contractual sporting testimonials. On the face of it, the Minister would have us believe that these changes are technical and benign. However, there is nothing technical about fundamental changes to the treatment of termination payments either for the employer paying them or for workers facing redundancy, who regard this final payment as an evaluation of the work they have done for their employer.

Termination payments, therefore, have both an emotional and a financial significance, and the amount awarded is often determined by painstaking and careful negotiations between managers and trade union representatives. A good employer might offer a generous termination payment to an employee as a sign that, even though they have had to make them redundant, it is not a judgment on the intrinsic worth of staff who are leaving.

However, a likely by-product of the Government’s proposed employer NICs charge is that it will incentivise employers to reduce the level of non-statutory termination payments to employees so that the overall level of non-statutory payments declines. This will diminish the level of termination payments available to workers who lose their job, while increasing the amount that the Government receive in NICs receipts.

The tax information and impact note for this measure goes to great lengths to clarify that this new charge will be limited to employers, and the Minister asserts that the Government have no plans to make further changes to the £30,000 statutory threshold, yet the Government’s own policy note states that this additional cost for employers will be reflected in lower wages.

The Office of Tax Simplification, which the Minister mentioned, noted in 2015 that imposing tax and national insurance contributions on all termination payments is “likely to have a significant cost impact for some people, particularly those lower paid employees who may…often be the ones receiving smaller termination payments”.

Despite the clear impact that this measure will have on workers and employers alike, the original consultation noted that the Treasury had failed to undertake a distributional analysis of the impact of this new charge. With that in mind, will the Minister confirm whether, a few years on, that remains the case?

Similarly, the Chartered Institute of Taxation has raised concerns that the Bill does not set out how the new class 1A charge will be collected by HMRC, stating that it will instead be left to secondary legislation—more secondary legislation, the Government’s default position. The Treasury says it anticipates that the charges will arise and be paid in “real time,” rather than after the end of the tax year. However, tax experts note that this is a break from normal practice and will prove extremely cumbersome, requiring additional resources at a time when the Government are continuing their disastrous reorganisation of HMRC.

**James Cartlidge:** It is always a great pleasure and highlight to hear the hon. Gentleman talking about distributional analysis, but does he agree that, where we have what are effectively exceptional one-off payments that are hard to predict, it can be difficult to undertake such analysis? Sometimes we just have to be honest and accept that a measure is relatively minor. Although the money it raises is significant, we are unlikely to have the sort of data he is asking for.

**Peter Dowd:** It might be a minor measure, but the actual impact on individuals is potentially significant. I am interested in the impact it might have on individuals who lose their job, and not necessarily the capacity or otherwise of the Government to make an assessment of that. I focus my attention on those who may not get another job for a considerable period.

I now turn briefly to the second measure in the Bill, which seeks to introduce a similar NICs charge on non-contractual sporting testimonials for employed sportspersons. I look forward to leading the Government’s testimonial sooner rather than later.

Sporting testimonial have become a key part of our nation’s rich sporting history, presenting an opportunity for fans to pay tribute to sportspersons who are coming to the end of their playing career. I come from Liverpool,
a city with a fantastic football team, Everton, and another football team, Tranmere Rovers. There is another team whose name I cannot remember; it has slipped my mind.

Under the Government’s proposal, the new class 1A employer NICs charge will apply after the first £100,000 and will make the controller of the sporting testimonial, usually an independent committee, liable to account for the charge where the employer is not organising the testimonial.

Although the Opposition recognise the logic of applying employer NICs to non-contractual sporting testimonials, where the money is going not directly to a sportsperson but, rather, to a testimonial committee, we are concerned that the majority of income from such testimonials comes from fans who make voluntary payments. If this measure is passed, there will be a clear inconsistency in the NICs treatment of voluntary donations or tips at sporting testimonials compared with the treatment of cash tips in the service sector, where the employer is not involved. That is something we will seek to address in Committee.

This condensed national insurance Bill is further evidence of the Government’s perpetual desire to shift the tax burden from the well-off to workers. Rather than tackling tax avoidance and raising taxes to ensure that the wealthy and large corporations pay their fair share, the Government are yet again introducing measures designed to raise additional revenue for the Exchequer from the termination payments of workers.

The introduction of a new employer NICs charge will inevitably lead to employers reducing non-statutory termination pay, leaving workers worse off when they have just faced the trauma of losing their job. To put it simply, this measure is unfair, cynical and disproportionate considering the scarring effect it will have on workers compared with the limited amount of revenue it will raise. We cannot support this, but we will look at it in more detail in Committee.

2.49 pm  

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Before I start discussing the Bill, Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope you will not mind my saying that it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), as always, but it is a particular pleasure to follow the brilliant speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) about climate change and his Bill about the net zero UK carbon account. It was one of the finest speeches I have heard since entering this place. It was an inspiring speech on an incredibly important subject.

Having said that, although I intervened on the hon. Gentleman to say that this was a minor matter, that does not mean it is unimportant. I meant that it was minor in terms of the revenue, albeit that its revenue is important and welcome. We should add that it has been baked into the Government’s accounts, so if anything, contrary to what the hon. Member for Cheltenham said, this measure has to suggest where £200 million a year of revenue was going to come from, as we would be spending this money on public services, from which we will all benefit.

Given the context of politics today, I would understand it if someone sitting in the Public Gallery or watching this debate elsewhere were to look at the title of this debate, “National Insurance Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) Bill”, and think to themselves, “With all that is going on in the country—with these Union Jack and European Union flags outside, and all the talk about European elections—Nigel Farage back out on the stump and so on—is this really what we should be debating?” I would say that this Bill is important because, in its own way, it is the future of taxation in this country. Members may think that that is an odd thing to say, but we are going to be seeing a lot more of this type of Bill on taxation: measures that deal with specifics. I would not necessarily say that it deals with avoidance, but it is certainly a tidying-up measure that brings in welcome revenue.

Contrary to what the hon. Gentleman said, the Bill has little noticeable impact. Why do I say that? Ever since the early 1990s—since the 1992 general election and the 1997 one—and for the time being perhaps, the days when one of the main parties would go into a general election promising to change one of the main rates of taxation have gone. When I was elected in 2015, the Government we served in had specific legislation saying that we would not increase the main rate of national insurance. I think it also said we would not raise the main rates of income tax and VAT. There was legislation about the aid budget. We then found out that we would not increase tax on the self-employed and we would not increase the main tax on the employed. In fact, we changed inheritance tax. You soon run out of anywhere left where you can change any substantive tax, which must have been a concern in the Treasury; you are left with those yet to come and the good, old-fashioned national credit card. Our party has tried to avoid using that as much as possible. If Labour were successful at the next election, I am not sure it would be quite so successful on that—I think the card would take something of a hit.

The reason we support these types of measures is not because we welcome tax increases per se. In the context where the Government have pledged not to increase main rates of tax—I am sure Labour would be the same, although perhaps not on corporation tax—and in a political climate of no parliamentary majority, it is difficult to pass those “more radical” tax changes. So we will see more and more of these types of changes. We may call them tidying-up exercises or tax simplification measures—we have had many similar measures called “anti-avoidance”—but the point is that in total they will bring in a lot of revenue. We are talking about significant revenue—£200 million a year is significant. If we put that in the context of the police budget, we see that it is a significant sum, so it is important. I will certainly be supporting this measure. I do not know whether the Labour party will, because I was confused by the hon. Gentleman’s speech. Perhaps we will get some clarity later.

One thing we should be wary of is that the specific area of taxation we are changing and increasing here is employers’ national insurance. I declare an interest, as an employer. I am a controlling director of a small business and have been for many years. It is fair to say that there are pluses and minuses with using employers’ NICs—as a method of obtaining revenue for Her Majesty’s Treasury. On the upside—this is why I have struggled with this measure—it is saying, “Here are a lot of similar activities and it just so happens that in some of them employers’ NI is not paid. It is in the other ones,
so we are harmonising the situation.” That is perfectly fair and reasonable. We have seen this in other contexts, with the classic one being IR35: people, often knowingly and perhaps sometimes unknowingly—it is hard to say—have constructed their tax affairs in such a way that, in effect, they are not having to pay either some employees’ taxes or the costs that there would be for a traditional company paying employees’ NI. It is important always to consider the application of employers’ NI because, if it is not applied fairly, it can offer a perverse incentive in the tax system and create strange behaviours.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has talked about people who became self-employed and were not genuinely self-employed—I cannot recall the precise phrase he used, but we all know what that means. It means that someone is setting up their tax affairs in such a way as to reduce the amount of taxation they pay, rather than doing so because they are a plumber who, by their very nature, is going to be self-employed.

I was a mortgage broker before I came to this place. My business expanded beyond that, I am pleased to say, but when I started out it was always interesting to receive applications from people who were using personal service companies. This was a real problem, and understandably so. They had the benefit of not paying the tax, but the downside was that it was hard to get a mortgage because they were not technically a permanent employee. The banks and building societies used to take the view that they should therefore have to show three years’ accounts, which was often difficult for a first-time buyer. I encountered this issue many years ago and it is a perennial one. It is an important issue we need to continue to look at, so it is important that we have this measure before us today, examining the application of employers’ NI.

When I served on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, when I was first elected, we held an interesting evidence session on gig employees—self-employed people or workers, whichever way one describes them, in the gig economy. These are people whose position is ambiguous. The Matthew Taylor report identified these people: they work for one employer and have all the characteristics of an employee, but are technically, because of their tax situation, self-employed. They thus have less security than other workers and cost their employer less. Interestingly, when we held the evidence session, I asked four of the largest such companies, including Hermes and, as I recall it, Amazon, whether they would consider paying into a form of auto-enrolment for the self-employed, were Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs able to set up auto-enrolment so that it could be applied for by the self-employed, particularly those who work for a single company, and they all said yes. I hope we will see progress on that. The point is that there has to be the fair application of employers’ NI, in order to avoid abuse of the system and, ultimately, those in employment, of whatever form, having less security, less entitlement to benefits and so on.

The point about sporting testimonials is timely. Cricket was mentioned, and I am sure you will be aware, as I am sure you will be there, Mr Deputy Speaker, that at 7 pm the England and Wales Cricket Board will be out in force on the Terrace to celebrate and mark the build-up to this year’s cricket world cup. I am sure you have had many invitations already. Others have declared an interest in that they are cricket supporters. I do not know whether that is an interest, but I am a supporter of Middlesex. I very much enjoy going to watch them and have done for many years, having been born in Edgware, in Middlesex. Those who spoke about this are absolutely right; testimonials are part of the fabric of cricket, football and so on. The key point to make, which has been mentioned but must be stressed, is that testimonials can be used to raise not just money for the Exchequer but considerable sums for charity. I believe Wayne Rooney’s testimonial raised £1.2 million, of which £1 million was donated to charity. In 2006, Alan Shearer raised £1.6 million in his testimonial, with most of it going to charity, as I understand it. Although there is a tax issue involved, we should recognise that these higher grossing testimonials, often involving fantastic sports stars and shown on television, are raising a lot for charity.

Peter Dowd: These testimonials are very important. A former Liverpool football player, Jamie Carragher, a Bootle lad, also had a testimonial and he put the best part of £1 million into his Jamie Carragher 23 Foundation. That is worth a mention.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the other Liverpool team, as it were. They seem to be doing quite well this season. It is a good and important point to make, because it sounds to me as though a relatively small number of sportspeople will have to pay a bit more tax in the coming years as a result of the Bill—there are a small number who do not have testimonials agreed contractually—but it is fair to have fairness.

Let me conclude on fairness. The hon. Member for Bootle and I have had one or two exchanges on Treasury matters over the years. He finished with quite a stirring wind-up, saying that with this Bill we were somehow supporting the rich—that classic old storyline that we were the party of failing to crack down on tax avoidance by the rich and were instead hitting the poorest. Well, what is the threshold in the Bill? It is £100,000.

Peter Dowd: What about redundancies?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman can correct me if I am wrong, but I believe the limit for testimonials is £100,000. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman mentions redundancy payments from a sedentary position; he can correct me if I am wrong again, but I do not think the Bill affects redundancy payments. It is about other, voluntary termination payments. On the subject of terminations, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be delighted to hear that I shall now terminate my speech, but I will support this very good Bill.

3 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Let me start by saying that I agree with almost everything that the Labour shadow Minister said. I will not make any cricket puns because I do not know anything about cricket—I will just stay out of that one—but I will make a point of mentioning that Aberdeen is obviously the greatest football team and should be mentioned first in any discussion of sporting prowess.
First, on the issues raised by the Labour shadow Minister about the Bill process, I share his concerns about the fact that we were told we would be getting the Bill before it had been introduced to this place. That is a real concern. Perhaps the Treasury drew the short straw again, and when the Government announced that they would have a Second Reading of a Bill but panicked because they could not work out which Second Reading it should be, they scrambled around and said to the Treasury, “You guys must have something”, and the poor Treasury Ministers were dragged here to present this Bill.

The serious point is that this is a highly technical Bill and we have had a very short time to look through it. I looked through the explanatory notes, as I am wont to do in these circumstances, but they do not talk about the amount of consultation that was done or the number of people who contributed to that consultation. I am aware that perhaps there are tax information and impact notes that do talk about the amount of consultation that was done, but it would have been useful to have that information in the explanatory notes so that we could be clear about how many individuals and organisations had come to the Treasury and said, “These are the good things and the bad things about the Bill.” That would have put us in a much more informed position, although I am sure we will get into the meat of that discussion in Committee.

On the intention behind the Bill, it was announced some time ago that there would be changes in this policy area and it has taken a while for the Bill to come through. Why has it come through now? If it has been intended for some time, why has it taken so long for the Bill to come before the House? Was it just that the Treasury drew the short straw, as I said, and had to bring a Bill to the House today and just had to find something? It would be useful to know something about the timing for the Bill, why it has come along now and what the logic behind that is.

I have a couple of questions on some of the specific things mentioned in the Bill. In introducing it, the Minister said that if there is a contractual obligation that there will be a testimonial, that will be treated differently, but also talked about cases in which there is an expectation that there will be a testimonial, which to me does not mean the same thing as a contractual obligation. I am not clear what the Treasury means by an expectation of a testimonial. Somebody could score a goal in every single club game they have ever played, but that does not mean they have a contractual testimonial obligation. I would expect, though, that that person would probably get a testimonial for being such a big part of their football club. Is that what is meant by “expectation”? If not, will the Treasury confirm exactly what is meant by that word in the Bill?

On the amounts for testimonials, the explanatory notes say:

“The new Class 1A liability does not affect individuals as it is to be paid by the controller of the sporting testimonial.”

That seems a bit disingenuous to me, because although it does not affect the individual’s liability, it does affect the amount of money they will get. Has the Treasury done any maths on how much less sporting individuals will get from their testimonials because this liability might have to be taken off before the money is handed over to them? It seems to me that, rather than being something quite removed, it will have a direct impact on individuals.

The Chartered Institute of Taxation got in touch with me with queries about some things in the Bill. On the £100,000 limit, the institute said:

“The intention is that the NICs rules will replicate this and only impose Class 1A NICs on the amount chargeable to income tax. We have reviewed the NICs Bill and it charges to Class 1A the amount that is ‘general earnings’. We assume this means the amount above £100,000... but it is not clear. The termination payments legislation refers specifically to the amount chargeable under the Income Tax (Earnings & Pensions) Act 2003. It is surprising that the same approach has not been adopted here.”

Why has the Treasury taken a different approach to the drafting of this legislation to that taken to the drafting of the termination payments legislation that was passed previously?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There is another question, about the definition of who is an employee and who is an employer. There have been various examples in the courts of people being treated as employers when they were actually employees. There is still a bit of obscurity about that when it comes to tax, which creates a lot of difficulty for people.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point. When in a moment I talk about the termination awards for individuals, I will discuss that specific issue.

On termination awards for employees, the explanatory notes say:

“The new Class 1A liability does not affect individuals as it is paid by the employer.”

The reality is that, again, it does affect individuals, because they will receive less money. If the employer is going to give out a pot of £40,000, they will be giving some of that to the Exchequer, instead of to the individual as they currently would. The details show that the Exchequer expects to receive £210 million for 2023-24 as a result of the change; do Ministers expect individuals to receive £210 million less and that that money will go to the Exchequer instead, or do they expect employers magically to find some more money and to continue to pay employees who are leaving their organisation the same amount as before, while paying a slice to the Treasury as well? It would be useful to know how much less the Treasury expects individuals to receive as a result of the change, not just how much the Treasury expects to receive.

The NICs change is the only example of a class 1A charge on cash earnings that the Chartered Institute of Taxation could find. Why has the Treasury decided to take the route it has chosen? Class 1A contributions are normally paid in respect of things such as benefits in kind, rather than on cash earnings. The Bill seems to me to make a fairly fundamental change to how NICs are treated and to the different classes of NICs. It would be useful to know why the Treasury has decided to make this change. Is it part of some sort of long-term plan to use class 1A charges on cash in other circumstances? Or will they continue to be used mainly on benefits in kind?

It seems to me that it is a bit of an ad hoc change. Perhaps the Treasury is putting forward some grand plan, or perhaps it is just a small change. I have asked
similar questions about the recent changes to the Financial Conduct Authority and the Bank of England. It seems that a lot of small ad hoc changes have been coming through with no blueprint for where the Treasury expects to be at the end of the process and what it expects the system to look like at that point. It would be useful to know more about that.

I would like to know about a few main things. On the £100,000 for sporting testimonials, is the Bill intended to operate in the way things operated under the previous legislation on sporting testimonials, but the language in the Bill is just unintentionally a bit woollier? On employees, we have that issue with the class 1A charge; does the Treasury intend to make further changes to class 1A contributions, or is this the last change it expects to make? We expect secondary legislation to come through as a result of the Bill, to tighten things up and make further changes in future, but when is that expected to come—in this Session, or quite close to the Bill’s implementation in 2020? If it is the latter and the secondary legislation does not come through in enough time, it might be difficult for employers to make sensible decisions.

Kirsty Blackman

3.10 pm Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). The two of us often seem to be in the Chamber at a similar time discussing tax issues.

These measures have been a long time in process. Back in the Budget of 2016, there was talk of a consultation on trying to align more closely national insurance with tax treatment. I note that, today, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury said that this is a form of simplification of the tax system. I might disabuse him of those thoughts by telling him to look more closely at the new rules regarding post-employment notice pay within payments in lieu of notice as part of termination payments. Far from being simple, it is actually rather complex.

As I said at the very start, these proposals have been making their way through this House in various forms. There were some delays because of the unexpected election in 2017, but they did find their way into a draft Bill in December 2016—the National Insurance Contributions Bill. Some proposed changes came through in the 2017 Budget, which included the scrapping of class 2 national insurance for the self-employed—currently £3 a week—and a corresponding increase in class 4 national insurance contributions for the self-employed. They were highlighted as fairly controversial at the time, but I did not share that view. I was quite supportive of the increase in class 4 national insurance because of the generosity, as I saw it, of the new state pension that came into play. That slight increase in the class 4 national insurance rate was, I felt, a fair quid pro quo for the quite substantial increase in the new state pension, but, for whatever reason, that measure was not taken through. I had some serious concerns about scrapping class 2 national insurance, and I will explain why.

The lowly paid self-employed person may not hit the threshold for class 4 national insurance contributions and so would be picking up a national insurance record into the future. Given that WASPI women have concerns about where they find themselves today, I was worried that this House and future Members of this House—I will probably be long, long gone—would face a raft of new people saying, “Where’s my pension. I have been self-employed all these years.” They would then be told, “Ah, but you didn’t pay any national insurance; you didn’t pay class 2, and you certainly weren’t earning class 4.” I was pleased to see that that idea disappeared and that we are back to what was the old system.

We have had this £30,000 threshold for tax-free redundancy payments—let me put it in easy terms—for quite some time. It could be argued that we have been at that level of £30,000 for too long. I did a bit of research before today and found that the last time that the £30,000 threshold was raised was with effect from 6 April 1988. It must have been considered to be the right rate at the time—it was an increase in rate from £25,000 to £30,000. I did not manage to find out when the £25,000 rate was first implemented, but it must have been deemed at the time to have been the right rate for what was a tax-free settlement, or payment, for years of service within a company. It was obviously deemed to be the right amount for people to adjust to a new working situation, or to act as a bridge towards retirement for people who were getting towards the end of their normal working life, which was perhaps more traditional in those days of the ’80s. I know the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) raised some of those points in his speech.

Having consulted the Office for National Statistics for inflation increases since 6 April 1988, I found that £100 then is now worth £266 today. Applying that inflationary increase from 1988—no more, no less—that £30,000 would inflate to £79,800, or in broad terms £80,000. However, I do understand—for the record I am a member of the Chartered Institute of Taxation and a chartered accountant—that there is probably a perception that the £30,000 settlement payment has been a target to hit rather than a proper target for any other reasons. Hence we now have this fairly complicated formula for payments in lieu of notice. Changes came in on 6 April 2018, including this whole concept of post-employment notice pay. It was really to recognise the difference between contractual payments in lieu of notice, and non-contractual payments in lieu of notice. I will not bore the House for too long with the formula that applies, but it is a fairly beefy one: it is basic pay multiplied by the number of days from the last day of employment, divided by the number of days in the last pay period, minus the amounts paid on termination—a formula given the letter T. Therefore, far from it being a tax simplification measure, the PILION rules have added quite a layer of complication to a figure of £30,000 that, in due course, should have been given adjustment for inflation in any effect.

We are now left with PILONs—the new PILONs assessment of what they are actually worth—holiday pay, and any restrictive covenants being included within that £30,000 limit that is tax free and national insurance free. Above that, we have the normal rules of tax and—in complex speak—employers’ class 1A national insurance coming into play. What we are likely to see in terms of adjustment, in answer to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North, is an increase in employer contributions to pension schemes as part of a settlement on the way out, which is not any bad thing. There is nothing wrong with that.
We have a very powerful and strong message to tell about auto-enrolment. It must be the right thing for all employees now. We are now running into millions, and there will be a fund approaching tens, if not hundreds, of billions in due course, and that must be to the good, as people accumulate their own pension funds. We will look back at auto-enrolment and see it as one of the most successful and vital measures that any Government could have implemented. It is like any other measure. It sounds expensive—it means a percentage off salaries, which will always be unwelcome particularly in times of low inflation, and it means that people might see their take-home salary go down—but there will be a lot of thanks from many employees in due course that these funds have been accumulated. If, in trying to circumvent, in an entirely legitimate way, paying the class 1A national insurance on these amounts—for normal employees over £30,000—employers provide more funding to a pension scheme, then that is something as a quid pro quo that the Treasury should actually support.

These measures should have come into play in April 2019. They were deferred last year for a further year, which is mentioned on page 42 of the official Red Book. Therefore, far from saying that these things have come out of the blue and have not been considered, they have been consulted upon since 2016. They nearly get somewhere, but were deferred for another year. Therefore, in terms of planning and getting that together, there is plenty of time for employers to make any due adjustment. I have really concentrated on part 1 of the Bill.

Let me turn to the sporting side of things and the £100,000 limit. There have been a lot of discussions on this subject, because we are talking about huge figures, especially when the very well-known sports stars have their testimonials. When there are millions of pounds involved, these people—who are already very wealthy—often decide to give all the money to charity, which is a laudable ambition. I suppose that the one downside of this type of legislation is that it is possible for the employer in such cases to suffer the national insurance on an amount that the recipient has never actually received because he or she has decided to put it through their tax return as a very generous donation to charity.

This subject brings out the debate about certain limits in our tax regime that have not been touched for a very long time. What was the purpose of the £30,000 threshold? There was a reason for it in 1988, but does it still apply in the modern employment market? Perhaps people do not work as long for the same employer now; that feature is probably slightly different today from how it might have been in 1988. What should the figure be? Does it deserve flexing up? We could have a similar debate across other bits of the tax code—perhaps including inheritance tax.

Lots of parts of the tax code have fallen behind inflation. They were originally there for a reason. Some were introduced when the Labour party was in government, but now that we are in government perhaps there is a debate to be had about what these things were for in the first place, as part of the tax simplification process. But if there is any fear or threat that there has been manipulation of the tax and NI system, it is right that these payments should be part of the normal weft and weave of what we are doing with national insurance. I therefore have no difficulty supporting the Bill, and I wish the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury every success in its progress through the House.

3.21 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who always talks about these issues from a professional perspective, related to his work before he first entered this place. It was very interesting to hear his comments, and I will return to some of them as I set out the Opposition’s summary of our concerns about the Bill.

When the Minister was introducing these measures, he said that they were expected. As many Members have said, they most certainly were expected. In fact, they were introduced a lot later than we had anticipated, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) pointed out. In fact, the Government’s paperwork associated with the measures indicated that some revenue has been lost as a result of that late presentation. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) noted that the figures here were “baked in” to the Government’s accounts. Well, if he looks at the accompanying paperwork to these measures, he will see that it actually appears that those expectations have had to change given the late presentation of the Bill to the House. Of course, Labour would take very different decisions on taxation. We believe that the rates for the very best-off should be increased for the top 5%, that a different approach should be taken to corporation tax and, in particular, that we should not be focusing on trying to increase tax on those people who have, above all, lost their jobs—of course, that is part of the focus of this legislation.

I will, however, start by discussing the sporting testimonials element of the Bill. These measures would see NICs treatment of sporting testimonials charged to class 1A NICs, mirroring the tax liability. As has been mentioned, this would only apply to testimonial payments exceeding £100,000. Many members have already noted that the situation—I hesitate to say “playing field” because we have definitely had enough puns in this debate—has changed since these testimonials were introduced, when many players were not earning enough money adequately to save for their retirement. Particularly in football, which is the sport that I know best in this regard, players at the very top levels are earning more than enough throughout their lifetime not to have to rely on these testimonial payments for future revenue. It is therefore appropriate that clubs as employers, or the testimonial committees that would be providing the payments, look to make these national insurance contributions.

The public are rightly angry about the amount of tax avoidance that the wealthiest in this country engage in, but I am concerned that these measures do not come close to addressing systemic issues within football, particularly around taxation. As I understand it, as of January, HMRC was looking into the financial affairs of 173 players, 40 clubs and 38 agents. Now, I have little doubt that the Minister is itching to mention the case of Rangers football club when he responds to the debate—I am well aware of the case that was taken against Rangers—but I think we need to contrast what has occurred in our country with developments in Spain, for example, where firm action has been taken against the extremely well-paid
players who sought to artificially avoid tax. We have not seen similar action taken here. For example, the problem around image rights companies was known about for quite a long time before action was firmly taken. It is an insult to the thousands of volunteers at clubs across the UK—who scrimp and save to ensure that the players are paid, the grounds and stands are properly maintained, and records are properly kept—to see some of those at the very top get away with sharp practices.

Ministers must be aware that testimonials are actually becoming less common as a means of ensuring financial security for players and that the funds from testimonials are very often donated to charity, as many hon. Members have mentioned. I would like some more detail from the Minister about the perceived impact of this legislation on funds being donated to charity. Yes, in some cases funds may pass straight to a charity, but in other situations they go to charity eventually—via a player. In fact, if one looks at the charities that have benefited from the most recent testimonials, many have been foundations associated with particular players. The Minister said that, of the previous 220 testimonials that have been examined in relation to coverage by such measures, most would not have been covered because the testimonial was contractual or because its value was less than £100,000, but he did not talk about testimonials where charitable donations were concerned. I am a little bit worried that this quite important source of funds for charities might not be getting the consideration it requires as part of the Bill. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that in his closing remarks or provide more detail in Committee.

I turn to the impact of the Bill on termination awards. The Bill would introduce a new 13.8% class 1A employer NICs charge to any part of a termination award that is already income tax liable. The Minister has stated his contention that abuse exists in this field, with the claim that some employers might be disguising final payments as termination payments. Again, we really need to see concrete evidence. We have probed on this issue in previous discussions on Finance Bills, but we have not been provided with evidence of abuse. Actually, from memory, consultations carried out in this area did not suggest that there was widespread evidence of abuse. Surely, we need that evidence before considering these measures in detail.

In fact, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) explained very clearly, this measure on employers’ national insurance contributions on termination awards is likely to lead to employers being much less generous with non-statutory termination awards and to leave people worse off at a time when many of them are most vulnerable. That could have severe implications for the individuals concerned, but it could also have wider economic implications. I was interested to learn that around 30% of all small businesses founded in the UK in recent times have been started in response to redundancy, with many people only having the resources to pursue their entrepreneurial ambitions because of their termination award. It is necessary to think about those wider impacts.

The Government maintain—indeed, we heard it again this afternoon—that this measure does not affect individuals, as it is paid by the employer, but that surely is not the case. In fact, the Government themselves predict in the material presented alongside the Bill that the measure would reduce wages overall by 0.1% over the year 2020-21. It is crucial that the Government undertake more detailed consideration of the likely impact of this measure.

As has been discussed, this is not the first time that this Government have sought to narrow the scope of tax relief on redundancy and termination payments. In the 2017 Finance Bill, they removed any exemption for payments in lieu of notice from the tax-free scope of payments for injuries. As Members will remember, that was very concerning with regard to workers’ rights, which are one of the main aspects of compensation in discrimination cases. The Opposition rightly contested that change.

Again in the 2017 Finance Bill, the Treasury provided itself with the power to vary the tax-free amount for other termination payments. Trade unions raised their concerns about that measure, as they believed that if the Treasury further lowered the tax-free threshold, it would incentivise employers to lower non-statutory termination awards even further. Indeed, the TUC has suggested that the tax-free element should be increased rather than decreased. I was interested by the comments made by the hon. Member for South Thanet, who noted that the value of the £30,000 threshold has been eroded significantly over time and would be worth more than double the amount if it had kept pace with current prices.

The Opposition remain concerned that the Bill still includes the power to potentially vary the NICs threshold upwards or downwards without proper scrutiny in this place, and I hope the Minister will be able to rule that out today. I also hope he will return to this in legislative form, to make it crystal clear that the Government do not intend to reduce the threshold.

I note that the guidance published alongside the legislation emphasises that “no statutory redundancy pay on its own will be affected”. That implies that non-statutory redundancy pay could find itself affected, exactly as the Opposition have warned. Can we have a clear statement that we will not see, via secondary legislation, tax and NICs treatment of voluntary redundancy payments for individuals with two years, or more or less than two years, of continuous service?

The Minister will be aware that this kind of application of class 1A NICs to cash earnings is highly unusual, to put it mildly. That point has been underlined by the Chartered Institute of Taxation and was made eloquently by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North. This appears to be a set of rather ad hoc changes. The hon. Member for South Suffolk, in a wide-ranging and interesting speech, suggested that the Bill is part of a general push to simplify the tax landscape, particularly when it comes to the relationship between payment as an employee and other forms of payment. In reality, we have seen an increasing complication of that landscape. We have not seen an alignment between the tax treatment of individuals and their employment treatment. Instead, we see an increasing bricolage of measures to try to deal with the disjunction, with what is happening around IR35 being a good example. One would hope that the Government will start to try to get a grip of this issue in a more determined and less ad hoc fashion in months to come—if, indeed, they have months to come.
There is one last administrative issue that I want to mention. We have had referred to us by experts in this area the fact that HMRC has suggested that the charge will arise and be paid in real time, rather than at the end of the tax year, as is the case with other class 1A charges. That seems to require a new process—again, additional complication—for submitting information through the pay-as-you-earn real-time information submission and for HMRC to have to adopt a different process for allocating the different elements of that payment. There are already many issues with it allocating real-time information payments into the wrong pots. This seems to suggest additional complication, and we need the Government to rethink this and consider an annual payment, rather than a real-time one. This change potentially comes at the same time as other significant forms of upheaval within the tax system, from making tax digital to preparations for Brexit.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle stated very clearly at the end of his remarks, we will not oppose the Bill at this stage, but we hope that it will be possible to make some substantial changes in Committee, because they are very much needed, as has been reflected by the tenor of this debate.

3.34 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate, which is narrow in scope, as the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury pointed out, but none the less important. There were a limited number of contributions, made up for, however, by their quality.

Let me bring us back to the essential element of what this Bill is all about, which is aligning the employer national insurance treatment in respect of termination awards and sporting testimonials with that of income tax. As a number of hon. Members pointed out, the rationale behind these measures is to bring in alignment and, with it, some elements of simplification. We should remind ourselves that, as we have heard, the genesis of this journey was back in 2013-14, with the report by the Office of Tax Simplification. Another rationale for these measures is to disincentivise any tendency towards the manipulation of payments as between earnings and termination payments on the tax side of things. There is, of course, additional revenue to the Exchequer of some £200 million per year as a consequence of these measures.

I turn now to some of the specific points that have been raised—first and foremost, by the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd). He told us some jokes about cricket that were not bad—well, by his standards, at least, they were passable. He managed to remember two of the three great football teams up in the Liverpool part of the country, proving conclusively, I have to say, that he knows far more about football than he does about economics and taxation. [Interruption.] Yes, cruel but fair. That was exemplified by his lamenting the fact that we did not abolish class 2 NICs. I was surprised to hear him say that, because he was at great pains, as he always is, to be the champion of the lower paid—as indeed are Conservative Members. The rationale for stepping back from that abolition, as he will know, is that it would have imposed a very significant burden on the very people he seeks to protect—the lower paid—by putting up the cost of the contributions that they would have to make in order to qualify for their state pension.

Curiously, the hon. Gentleman accused us, contrary to the assertions of the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), of having rushed the timetable for this legislation, despite the fact that its genesis was about five years ago. That is probably indicative of the speed at which a future Labour Government would get things done—five years is rushing it, in those terms. He also accused us of not taking the legislation seriously, but as he spoke there were precisely none of his hon. or right hon. Friends sitting on the Benches behind him.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) gave a masterful performance in which he not only showed great in-depth knowledge of the issues at hand but understood the mentality and the challenges that we have as Ministers in the Treasury. It is indeed a restrictive environment where we do not want to put people’s taxes up, we make commitments not to do so, and we fight day in, day out to ensure that we stick to those pledges. But at the same time, we do of course have to raise revenue, as he described. He also cantered around the tax terrain, touching on IR35, auto-enrolment and various other aspects of tax. It was a very thoughtful contribution to the debate.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) specifically referenced the amount of consultation—or the lack of it, as she saw it—around the Bill. I should remind her that we have consulted on it twice. It was issued in draft in December 2016, and it was prefigured when we handled the income tax aspects of these issues in the 2016 and 2017 Finance Acts. Of course, the measures themselves were first mooted back in 2015, so we have been round the block with them.

Kirsty Blackman: The point I was making was not that there was necessarily a lack of consultation, but that we did not know how much consultation there had been, because the details are not in the explanatory notes, where they would often be. Normally, the explanatory notes will say a bit about the amount of consultation there has been, but they do not say anything at all. If that had been written down for us, and we had known how many consultation responses there had been, I would not have asked the question.

Mel Stride: The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury has just reminded me that there has been a lot of information out there—we have, not least, written to Members to explain the background to these measures.

As to the hon. Lady’s specific point, she has raised the quality of information memorandums with me before in a different context. I said on that occasion, and I will restate now, that I am happy to look at the point she has raised. While we may have disagreements over policy across the House, I think we all accept that it is important that the relevant information is clearly provided and in the right place, and I will certainly be happy to look at that issue.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of tax treatment where there is an expectation that a testimonial payment will be made. She understandably asked how we know whether such a payment should be seen as having an
expectation attached to it. The answer is if that payment is customary. If someone is involved in a sports club of some sort, and there is a testimonial every year for a particular player or group of players, and that had been going on for some time, that would be a customary testimonial situation. In those circumstances, the tax treatment would follow accordingly.

The hon. Lady also raised a point about employer NICs at 13.8% being applied above the £30,000 threshold. She raised the prospect that some of that may be borne by the employee, because the employer would have a certain amount that they were looking at. She raised the question of what the balance was between who bears that cost and the £200 million per year received by the Exchequer. I very much doubt that that information is available, but if it is, I will certainly make sure that we provide it to her. That may be an issue she wishes to come back to in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) specifically majored on the threshold—the £30,000—and pointed out that it first came into effect in 1988. What I would say to him is that, in the case of Germany and the United States—certainly in the case of income tax—the threshold is effectively zero, so in terms of international comparisons, the figure of £30,000, while it is true that it has not increased by inflation since 1988, is none the less set at a reasonable and proportionate level. As a number of speakers have also pointed out, 80% of termination payments are below the £30,000 level. As a number of speakers have also pointed out, in 1988, is none the less set at a reasonable and proportionate terms of international comparisons, the figure of £30,000, of income tax—the threshold is effectively zero, so in

The second issue the hon. Lady raised was charitable giving. She set up the prospect of a testimonial being held and the money going through the committee and then on to a charity. She asked what the tax treatment would be in those circumstances. It is open to a committee giving to the charity—that is without limit—to make sure that the right amount of tax is paid. I will not rehearse the arguments that the hon. Lady has heard from me on many occasions about the tax gap and how successful the Government have been in that respect compared with Governments of the past.

The hon. Lady mentioned the impact of these measures on wages, citing the correct figure of 0.1% for the reduction by 2020-21. However, I point out that we have now had 10 months of increased real wages, due to our success in keeping inflation down and generating nominal wage growth. Of course, with regard to employment, which is part of the issue we are addressing, we now have among the highest levels of employment in our history, and the lowest unemployment since the mid-1970s.

In conclusion, I thank the Opposition and all Members for their contributions, and for not opposing Second Reading.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (TERMINATION AWARDS AND SPORTING TESTIMONIALS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the National Insurance Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee. Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 16 May 2019.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets. Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (programming sub-committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading. Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.——(Mel Stride.) Question agreed to.
NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (TERM A NATION AWARDS AND SPORTING TESTIMONIALS) BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 32 (1) (a)).

That, for the purpose of any Act resulting from the National Insurance Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) Bill, it is expedient to authorise provision adding termination awards chargeable to income tax to the amount by reference to which, in the case of Class 1A National Insurance Contributions, the appropriate national health service allocation (for England, Wales and Scotland) and the appropriate health service allocation (for Northern Ireland) are to be calculated.—(Mel Stride.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Public confidence in the Prime Minister

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The petition asks the House to hold a debate of no confidence in the Prime Minister at the earliest opportunity. It is from representatives of the United Kingdom. The lead signatory is Leonard Harris from Accrington in Lancashire. Other signatories include many from Dorset constituencies, including Christchurch, and from representatives of Leavers of Dorset. The lead signatory wanted to submit an e-petition calling for someone to lose their job. It was ruled inadmissible because it is not possible to submit an e-petition for someone to lose their job. It was deemed that the consequence of the petition was that the Prime Minister would lose her job, so it was ruled out. Hence this old-fashioned public petition.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom, declares that the Prime Minister repeatedly promised that the UK would leave the European Union on 29 March 2019 and that the only way to prevent that happening without a deal was for the UK to leave the EU on 29 March 2019, further intervened to prevent the UK leaving the EU on 29 March 2019, thereby going back on her guarantee that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed; and further as a result that they have no confidence in the Prime Minister.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons hold a debate and make a decision on a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister at the earliest opportunity.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

NI Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) Bill

3.47 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I am very grateful for this opportunity to raise the important matter of the future of Welbeck Defence Sixth Form College in Leicestershire. The college is in the constituency of my constituent, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), by a few hundred yards, but I have been delighted to visit the college on a number of occasions, both before and since my election in 2010 to represent Loughborough. This is clearly a matter of national importance. It is good to see my hon. Friend in his place on the Treasury Front Bench. I think I can confidently say that at least on this subject he and I are going to be firmly of the same mind. In particular, we would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the fantastic staff, pupils and governors, both past and present, for their unwavering commitment to our armed forces, as well as their contribution to the local area and the college over many years; and also to Councillor David Snartt, who has always been a strong voice for the college.

Welbeck is a full boarding co-educational college, funded by the Ministry of Defence. It offers an A-level education to young people who go on to study a degree at a partner university and receive an annual bursary before starting their careers as technical officers within the Royal Navy, Army, Royal Air Force or the MOD civil service. The college now has over 300 boarding pupils, and students come from all over the UK and from a wide variety of backgrounds. This positive impact on social mobility is something I will return to.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate. I declare an interest as a former member of the Army for 14 and a half years as a part-time soldier. Does she not agree that the college is a way of sowing into the future those whose career choice is the armed forces and that closing it down sends a contradictory message to the official one, which is that we want young people to make a career out of the armed forces? Money spent on sowing it into the lives of young people can never be wasted. In other words, money spent now will increase our forces, making soldiers who are special. The British Army is the best in the world.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much indeed for that intervention. I agree with him. From testimonials sent to me by former students and their families, I know how strongly they agree, too. In many cases, Welbeck has transformed their life chances. As he also says, this is about building fantastic armed forces, particularly with a science, engineering and technology background, for the United Kingdom. I am sure the Minister will want to cover how he thinks the changes proposed will enhance that and not detract from it. There is some convincing to do on that score.

Welbeck aims to prepare students for life at university and beyond by giving them a well-rounded curriculum that will—as a champion of character education, I particularly endorse this—"challenge and develop them academically, physically and socially."
The college also aims to develop students on a personal level by challenging them through a diverse range of co-curricular activities, which include many different sports, combined cadet force activities, and working within the community through volunteering and charity work.

On 6 April 2018, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who is the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, wrote to me and my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood:

“I am writing to inform you that the Ministry of Defence will be undertaking a review of the Defence Sixth Form College at Welbeck as part of an ongoing initiative to understand how to improve the supply of STEM graduates into Defence and the Armed Services... Welbeck is part of our wider scheme for recruiting STEM graduates. In its role to encourage pupils in relevant A-level subjects prior to moving to the next phase of the scheme where they are supported through STEM courses at university. If successful they then go into Initial Officer Training with one of the Armed Services or enter the Civil Service within the MOD. Like many other organisations, we”—the MOD—“have found it consistently difficult over recent years to attract sufficient, good quality, STEM candidates. Whilst the education and wider experience provided by Welbeck is of a high standard, and despite measures to mitigate shortfalls, intake targets are not being achieved. Equally, over the 5-6 years they are in the pipeline the numbers seeing it through to Initial Officer Training has consistently only been about 55%.

The review will look at the breadth of the operation of Welbeck, which is a private Finance Initiative establishment run by a contractor, Minerva. It will explore re-setting the current PFI, extracting better value from the current PFI, and also whether a different STEM graduate recruiting scheme would better meet Defence’s needs. We will be instructing PwC to work with Minerva to explore the viability of these options.

Whilst the review will be internal to MOD only, I understand that such a review can create uncertainty and potentially some concern among your constituents. I want to reassure you, however, that no decisions will be made until the review is complete, at which point I will write to you again. One of the assumptions of the review is that, whatever happens, students who are currently on the scheme will be able to see it through to graduation and joining the Services or Civil Service.”

I know that, as the local MP, my hon. Friend raised a question with the Prime Minister on this in the House in the hope that a new and untried system will be more successful.”

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend, I, on behalf of the Defence Committee, received a number of representations from people involved with Welbeck who stressed the high quality of the service it provides. I cannot help wondering if part of the problem is that not all Welbeck graduates go into the armed services. Perhaps part of the solution is that part of the budget should be funded by some other Department to recognise the fact that there is an educational benefit that goes wider than just recruitment into the armed forces.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He speaks with great expertise as Chair of the Defence Committee and makes an interesting point. If I were still Secretary of State for Education, I would be thinking about the impact on my budget, but he made two broader points. The first is about the positive impact of having more young people studying science, technology, engineering and maths in this country. Of course, if they are going to be part of our armed forces or the MOD civil service, that is a great thing for the country, but there are many other fantastic STEM-based jobs that will benefit this country too, and I suspect that many of those future employees have started life at Welbeck and been inspired there.

The second point is about how the decision was made, what alternatives were looked at and who was consulted. In his letter to the MOD, the Chair went on to say:

“Our understanding is that the staff and governors were not consulted on the College’s future and it does not seem obvious to us that the creation of SGIS requires the closure of the College.”
He asked why the decision must lead to the closure of Welbeck, whether the change between the two schemes offers value for money, how closing the college will help UK defence

“in an increasingly competitive market for STEM graduates in the UK and globally”,

and whether the staff and governors of the college were consulted before the written statement, or whether they were informed of the decision without being able to influence the review. We look forward to reading the Government’s response to that letter, which I suspect, like all other Select Committee correspondence, will be published and made available to the public in due course.

The decision is clearly very unsettling for staff, families, current students and those who had hoped to study there in future. We note the current 847 signatures on the petition on the Parliament website and the current 1,076 signatures on the 38 Degrees petition site. The latter petition calls for a consultation to be held to include parents, staff, students and other relevant stakeholders over the proposed closure of Welbeck. As I have said, it is clear from the comments received just how strongly parents and families feel. I have selected two of those I have received. The first reads:

“It is incredibly disappointing to read that Welbeck Defence Sixth Form College is to shut...Our 15 year old daughter...has visited Welbeck twice as she has her heart set on joining the Navy and training to be an air engineer. Welbeck provides a place where young women can be encouraged and supported into engineering careers. It offers a standard and type of education—and opportunities—that would otherwise be out of reach to families like us who are not affluent and cannot afford to pay for expensive boarding schools”.

The second reads:

“I strongly believe without Welbeck my son would not be achieving as well as he is doing now. Welbeck is there for intelligent children from poor backgrounds and not just for children from private schools or more affluent families. They are all given the same opportunity from an early age to reach their full potential academically and within many sports and other areas which my son would not have been able to achieve at sixth form college. Welbeck is a community: a family and a collection of likeminded intelligent young adults who are training with the mind set to do as well as possible just for themselves but for their country and their chosen entry force. My son ended up getting offers from both and chose the RAF to follow on from his years at air cadets.”

I hope that in his reply the Minister will address the questions raised by the Chair of the Defence Committee and say how he thinks the new scheme will still benefit the students whose lives and futures are being shaped and transformed by Welbeck. I hope he can also take us through how the review was conducted and who was involved.

If this decision is not to be reversed, this fantastic site could well be empty in just a couple of years. Neither my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood nor I want an empty site just sitting there, nor do we want it sold off to any old bidder. We know there is already local interest. The Minister’s written statement made it clear that an alternative use within either education or defence would be found. I hope that the PFI contract will not put future occupiers off or provide an excuse for officials not to pursue alternative uses sooner rather than later. If he can shed more light on plans for the site, we would be pleased to hear them.

I finish with another comment from a family.

[Interruption.] The Minister is poised. He cannot wait. I am delighted—he is a coiled spring—but I hope he will bear with me while I read out one further comment:

“The training and preparation that the students receive is truly first class and I am fearful that we may lose something irreplaceable which, if lost, will be impossible to replicate.”

I echo that sentiment. I hope that, at a time when the UK needs all the talent that we can muster, the Minister will understand the concerns that I have set out and provide reassurance. I suspect that this will not be the last debate or set of questions on the issue that I have raised. As the local Members of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood and I look forward to working with the Minister and his officials on this important matter.

4.5 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) on securing the debate, and, indeed, on all her contributions and support for the college over many years. I also acknowledge the presence of the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), to whom my right hon. Friend referred. I should perhaps add, by way of explanation to the general public, that he is unable to speak today because of his role as a Minister. However, his very presence on the Front Bench alongside me today highlights the fact that he has been a champion for Welbeck during his tenure as the local Member of Parliament.

As I listened to my right hon. Friend, it was impossible not to recognise and appreciate the affection that is felt for the current Welbeck Defence Sixth Form College—as well as its predecessor establishment, Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire—and the disappointment that some will feel at the decision to close it as part of the MOD’s move to a new scheme for recruiting science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduates to careers in defence. It is, perhaps, most important for me to acknowledge the high-quality education that Welbeck has been providing, and to pay tribute to its excellent staff and the talented young graduates who have gone on to forge successful careers in defence.

Let me say at the outset that the MOD remains firmly committed to attracting high-quality STEM graduates into the armed forces and the civil service, which, in turn, will contribute to support for the wider UK STEM agenda. In an increasingly complex and technologically driven world, we need talented individuals with a diverse range of STEM skills to ensure that we keep pace with our competitors and are fully prepared to meet the challenges and threats that we face today and, especially, in the future.

Welbeck has undoubtedly played its part in producing excellent STEM graduates. I should explain that attendance there forms the first stage of a two-part scheme, the defence technical officer and engineer entry scheme—or DTOES, another fantastic abbreviation that only the MOD could come up with. I shall refer to it simply as “the old scheme”. It is very following two years at the college and successful completion of A-levels, students have gone on to select universities to study for STEM degrees and joined one of four defence technical
[Mark Lancaster]

undergraduate scheme squadrons. On graduation, they have entered initial officer training with one of the services or become defence civil servants. Under the old scheme, they could go to only 11 universities in the United Kingdom, including just one in Scotland; under the new scheme, that range will be widened. The courses available under the old scheme were traditional STEM courses, rather than—at this point I should declare my interest as the deputy commander of the 77th brigade—courses involving information advantage, cyber, and other 21st-century skill sets that are now required in the military.

Unfortunately, the fact is that the scheme as it stands has consistently failed to deliver the required number of engineers and technical officers to Defence since its establishment in 2005. Despite efforts to improve its output, on average only 53% of entrants have completed it successfully, and a proportion of those have not achieved STEM degrees. While this is not about money, it should be noted that the scheme has cost the MOD and the taxpayer some £200,000 per student who has become a STEM graduate.

My right hon. Friend touched on social mobility, which has been an important part of the scheme. She may be interested to know that just 15% of Welbeck graduates have had a general household income of up to £20,000—perhaps those at the lower end of that bracket—while 60% have had a household income of over £60,000. We are also interested in that area in trying to improve the social mobility aspect of the new scheme.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the review, and we did have a review. In effect, 11 different options were considered, which were broken down into three broad categories: do nothing—retain the current scheme as it is; do better—identify a number of sub-options that would all retain Welbeck; or do something differently—identify a number of sub-options that would involve the closure of Welbeck. There really was a genuine effort to look at a vast range of options.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned consultation with staff and governors before the decision was made. A cross-section of both Welbeck staff and governors were engaged during the course of the study by the review team. Equally, prior to the announcement, Defence Academy staff formally engaged with contractors, and the review was a standing agenda item for the board of governors. There were also two “town hall” meetings with staff in June and November last year.

The reasons why some individuals have not completed the old scheme, leaving it early at either Welbeck or university, are varied and complex, but they include medical, academic and voluntary withdrawals. Ultimately, asking young people to make life-determining decisions at age 14 or 15 has, in some cases, been one factor that may have impacted on both recruitment and retention. Another downside of the previous scheme was its relative inflexibility, which I have already touched on, principally because of the fixed costs of Welbeck. This really has meant that the Ministry of Defence could not respond effectively or quickly enough to changes in requirement, or target spending where it would be most effective.

Looking to the future, as I set out in my statement to the House on 11 March, a review of STEM officer recruiting concluded that an alternative method of recruiting STEM graduates was needed to improve the numbers entering a career in defence. The STEM graduate infow scheme has been designed significantly to increase the number of STEM graduates brought into Defence and the variety of STEM disciplines they are from. Unlike the old scheme, it will be open to undergraduates across all UK universities, studying a wider range of STEM subjects that will include cyber and other new technologies.

The scheme will be supported by an attractive financial package, whereby undergraduates may receive a mix of bursary, tuition fee payment and other targeted payments that are significantly higher than the current bursary of up to £4,000 per annum. This will attract and support a wider range of applicants who are already academically proven, having passed A-levels or being already in the undergraduate pipeline. Importantly, this will provide a greater opportunity to improve both social mobility and diversity. The new scheme, with its focus on supporting individuals through university, will enable more students from a wider range of backgrounds to receive financial support. Indeed, we hope and anticipate that we will double the number of students who receive support.

The financial package has been benchmarked against industry offerings for their own STEM graduate schemes, and it will be competitive. Even with this financial package, however, it will be better value for money—estimated at about a third of the cost per student of the old scheme. The new scheme will also be inherently flexible, allowing the Ministry of Defence more easily to adjust its requirements should the demand for STEM graduates change—for example, due to an increase in requirement or, indeed, a need for specific skills.

Full transition to the new scheme will take place incrementally over the next five years, during which, as my right hon. Friend has said, the current intake of students will be fully supported. The MOD and the single services will develop their specific schemes over this period according to their own requirements, and that is where the flexibility will come in. These are likely to be built around their existing officer recruitment schemes. It may still include some sponsorship of those at school, depending on individual service need, but personnel and funding from the old scheme will be transferred to these schemes to enable them to undertake this work.

Dr Julian Lewis: Can the Minister tell me how long it will take to determine whether the new scheme is a success? If it is found not to be a success, will it be too late to go back to a continuation of the college-based scheme?

Mark Lancaster: As I said in my earlier remarks, this is effectively a five-year transition. The intake to Welbeck this year will be going into a two-year programme, which will be the last. That will give us two years, as we move to a more undergraduate-focused scheme, to get the new scheme right according to single service requirements. The new scheme, which will run for a period of time, will also be under review. We have not leapt to this decision—anything but—and we hope that the transfer period will allow us to get it right.

As I have said, the new scheme, like any recruitment initiative, will of course be kept under review to ensure that it is achieving the output it is designed to achieve. If it is not, we will look at it again. The final intake to
Welbeck will enter in September this year, and for the final two years Welbeck remains a going concern. Over that period, we will work closely with the Welbeck contractor, Minerva, and the principal to help the contractor to support staff who are impacted and to ensure continuity of quality education to students, keeping staff, governors and pupils fully informed of any developments.

I recognise that there are concerns over the future of the Welbeck site, and I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough that it has become an important part of the local community. I can reassure her and the House that we will do all we can to secure an alternative, sustainable future use for the site. An assessment is being undertaken to determine whether Defence may itself have a use for it and, in addition, some early market testing has identified credible, prospective interest from the private education sector. It is too early to say what the outcome will be, but Defence will work with stakeholders, including the local authority and partners across Government, to seek to secure a viable future for Welbeck.

**Nicky Morgan:** I thank the Minister very much for his response. Some of these issues might well be commercially sensitive, so I wonder whether he would be willing to meet me and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), at an appropriate point, to discuss some of that interest in more detail with officials. It would be helpful to have such discussions, perhaps on an ongoing basis, until the future of the site has been secured.

**Mark Lancaster:** That is a perfectly reasonable request, and I would of course be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend and the Minister. I want to take this opportunity to underline the Department’s determination for the site to be utilised and not to become moribund. It is a great site, and it is in the wider interest that there is a smooth transition to its future use. We are determined that that will happen.

The scheme has made a valuable contribution to Defence’s need for STEM-qualified officers, but we need to increase numbers well beyond the current ability to deliver, as I have tried to explain. We also need to have greater flexibility about the sorts of graduates that we are now attracting into our 21st century armed forces. We need to be more responsive and agile, both to succeed in an increasingly competitive market for STEM graduates in the UK and globally, and to meet the challenges that we are now likely to face. However, I do not underestimate the impact of this decision on my right hon. Friend’s local communities, and, if I may, I shall end as I started, by paying tribute to her for raising this matter and, crucially, to the staff at Welbeck, who have done such a sterling job for so many years.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.18 pm

*House adjourned.*
Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Venezuela

1. Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that UK aid reaches its intended recipients in Venezuela.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to pay a brief tribute to Dr Richard Valery Mouzoko Kiboung, who was working for the World Health Organisation to fight Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo when he was killed in an attack on 19 April. Richard was working in the frontline of the response to save lives, and I am sure that the whole House will want to send our condolences to his family, friends and colleagues at this difficult time and to reiterate that health workers are not a target.

The UK’s humanitarian assistance is underpinned by strict principles of neutrality and impartiality, and it is targeted to meet the needs of those affected by the crisis.

Mr Dunne: I associate myself with my right hon. Friend’s remarks in supporting all those who are fighting the battle against Ebola in Africa.

After last night’s disturbing scenes on the streets of Caracas, what does my right hon. Friend say to those who retreat to their ideological comfort zone, blaming US imperialism rather than calling out the socialist Venezuelan regime for the humanitarian disaster that it has inflicted on its own people?

Penny Mordaunt: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. Let me be clear that this is a man-made crisis, caused by years of reckless mismanagement by the regime. Yesterday evening, while my right hon. Friend and others in this House were watching those terrible scenes of armoured military vehicles slamming into civilian protestors, I understand that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) was defending Maduro and his regime.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Is it not now clear that there needs to be maximum solidarity internationally—from European Union countries, the United States and Latin American countries—with Juan Guaidó and the people of Venezuela, as the final days of the Maduro regime approach?

Penny Mordaunt: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who has been consistent in his condemnation of the regime. We are working through the Lima group; it is absolutely right that we should give support to the region as well as Venezuela in particular. I call on all Members to support and call for swift presidential elections so that we can let the country move on.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The emergency £6.5 million UK emergency aid package to Venezuela was announced in February. Will the Secretary of State outline the priorities for that, especially given reports that up to 80% of Venezuelan households are without a reliable food source and the World Health Organisation’s suggestion that there has been a stark increase in maternal and infant mortality, and in malaria, tuberculosis and many other infectious diseases?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are prioritising healthcare and nutrition needs. We will keep monitoring the situation, as those needs will change over time. This is an emergency, and people are in life-threatening situations.

Development Co-operation: EU

2. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What progress the Government have made in determining the future relationship of the UK and the EU on development co-operation.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The political declaration recognises our shared commitment to tackling global challenges and achieving the sustainable development goals. We have proposed a future development partnership that allows the UK and the EU to work together to maximise development impact, where it makes sense for us to do so.

Tom Brake: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. Bearing in mind that our leaving the European Union could result in fundamental changes to development, is she aware of the concerns of organisations such as Bond, which say that they are not involved enough in what the future arrangements might look like? What more could the Government do to ensure that such organisations are indeed involved?

Penny Mordaunt: The EU’s development programmes will be the poorer for not being shaped by the UK and not making use of British and UK non-governmental organisations. I have provided a guarantee to all British suppliers, whether in the private or charitable sectors, so that they can continue humanitarian work on EU programming that has already been put in. I encourage the Commission to lift its eyes and enable us to co-operate on development. That is what we want to do; it is the block to that.
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when we leave the EU, it will be easier for us to strike trade deals with developing nations around the world—creating jobs for those nations, thus enabling their economies to grow, as well as ours?

Penny Mordaunt: I do agree. We should remember that we must ensure that we deliver on the referendum result. It is not just going to offer new opportunities for us and our trading relationships; it could also be a catalyst for changing the way the world trades and helping developing nations trade themselves out of poverty.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The UK has long played a leadership role within the European Union in shaping its development and humanitarian response. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that even outside the European Union we will maintain close co-operation, so that the world’s poorest do not suffer as a result of Brexit?

Penny Mordaunt: I can give the hon. Gentleman those assurances. We want to continue to co-operate with our European partners. We would like to have a sensible development partnership with the EU going forward. Currently, the EU is not as keen on that as us and other nations outside the EU. I hope its programming in the future will be open.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that across the world the UK is seen as a development superpower? Does she agree that our leaving the EU will have no effect on that?

Penny Mordaunt: That is quite right; it will have no effect on our ability to be able to do things and to work with partners. I hope that the European Commission, and in particular its legal department, will see sense and recognise that 20% of the non-governmental organisations it currently uses are British because we are world-class. Its programming will be poorer if it does not continue to use world-class organisations.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): With time running out, the Government need to arrange a large volume of trade deals in a short period of time—deals they said would be easy but are not. There is a concern that to do so they may promise aid spending as an inducement to a favourable trade deal. Will the Secretary of State today commit to aid spending continuing to be untied and always being based on need alone, rather than for our own commercial and trade ends?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, I have always said that and we will always do that.

Climate Change

3. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What support her Department provides to help developing countries tackle climate change. [910642]

12. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What support her Department provides to help developing countries tackle climate change. [910654]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): Tackling climate change is a priority for the Government. We have committed £5.8 billion to help developing countries to reduce emissions and to manage the impacts of climate change. To date, our support has helped 47 million people cope with the effects of climate change and supported 17 million people to gain access to clean energy.

Craig Tracey: The latest round of funding for the Darwin Initiative has committed £10 million of funding for 52 international projects. Can the Minister confirm that those projects will support and enhance biodiversity and the natural environment right across the globe?

Harriett Baldwin: I welcome the way in which the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has allocated that money. Of course, it is overseas development assistance money that helps to support and enhance biodiversity in countries that are eligible for overseas development assistance.

Huw Merriman: It is very welcome that the Government are doing more to help developing countries with climate change, but the reality, as I have seen for myself, is that the Chinese are leaving a very large carbon footprint in African countries. What more can the Government do to persuade the Chinese to do better in Africa?

Harriett Baldwin: I know that my hon. Friend is an aide to the Chancellor and I know that the Chancellor was in China this week emphasising in his remarks the importance of taking into account the sustainable development goals in development projects. I am very pleased to see that 78 countries, including China, have issued green bonds here in the City of London, with eight different currencies raising £24.5 billion towards sustainable development. The UK has really shown leadership on this initiative.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Further to that question by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), does the Minister concede that we must all do what we can to reduce the impact of climate change, but that very significant pressure must be applied to those at the very top in that regard, such as China and some African countries?

Harriett Baldwin: It is really important that we all recognise that the world has signed up to sustainable development goals. Part of that sustainability means that any new investments should avoid fossil fuels as much as possible. We have shown leadership on that recently. For example, the recent round of bids from the Green Climate Fund, which we helped to fund, has led to a lot of renewable energy projects in Africa and elsewhere.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given the growing climate crisis, should it not be the Department’s top priority to ensure sustainable development, diversification, the end of deforestation, public transport, clean energy and everything else?

Harriett Baldwin: Of course that is a very important priority. Humanitarian assistance continues to be what we spend most on, but the emphasis of that can also be sustainability. We do a great deal to ensure that.
The £5.8 billion that we have so far contributed to international climate finance gives an idea of the level of our commitment to this issue around the world.

**Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): I have seen for myself how Tearfund’s programme of providing solar technology in countries such as Bangladesh has transformed the lives of young people, so I am pleased to hear that DFID will extend those efforts into Africa. Does the Minister agree that young people having the chance to study under light at night will help to improve their life chances significantly?

**Harriett Baldwin** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What support her Department provides to Tibetan cultural programmes for Tibetan refugees living outside China.

The £5.8 billion that we have so far contributed to international climate finance gives an idea of the level of our commitment to this issue around the world.

**The Secretary of State for International Development** (Tanya Goldfinch) (Con): DFID provides funding to the UN Refugee Agency, to prioritise the greatest humanitarian and protection needs of refugees globally. This includes Tibetan refugees in need of urgent life-saving assistance.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I wonder whether the Minister will today commit to auditing and publishing UK aid spending on fossil fuels through the CDC, the prosperity fund and multilateral organisations?

**Harriett Baldwin** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What steps her Department provides to Tibetan cultural programmes for Tibetan refugees living outside China.

**Penny Mordaunt** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps her Department provides to Tibetan cultural programmes for Tibetan refugees living outside China.

**Tibetan Refugees**

**5. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What support her Department provides to Tibetan cultural programmes for Tibetan refugees living outside China.

The £5.8 billion that we have so far contributed to international climate finance gives an idea of the level of our commitment to this issue around the world.

**The Secretary of State for International Development** (Penny Mordaunt) (Con): DFID provides funding to the UN Refugee Agency, to prioritise the greatest humanitarian and protection needs of refugees globally. This includes Tibetan refugees in need of urgent life-saving assistance.

**Tim Loughton**: I hope to attend the seventh world parliamentary convention on Tibet together with the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), which will mark 60 years of the invasion and oppression of the Tibetan people, the 1 million lives lost and the oppression of the culture, language and human rights of those people. Many are refugees in Dharamsala and in desperate need of our help to keep the spirit of Tibet alive. Can we do more to help those refugees through the culture and education programmes that they value so much?

**Penny Mordaunt**: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Clearly, DFID’s funding is very much focused on education; but it is also focused on humanitarian assistance and support for refugees. I undertake to talk to my colleagues in both the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Foreign Office to see what more we can do to support culture and heritage for the Tibetan people.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I am very glad that the Secretary of State is taking an interest in Tibet, but can I urge her, reflecting on an earlier question, to look at the impact of climate change on what is often dubbed the third pole—on the melting of the Himalayan glaciers? It is having a huge impact on the Tibetan area but is overlooked when we talk about climate change.

**Penny Mordaunt**: It is absolutely right that the hon. Lady should raise that point. Of the areas where Britain can contribute most to the 17 global goals, I personally think that some really stand out: the key three being healthcare, climate change and partnerships. The hon. Lady knows that the Prime Minister, who is the UN Secretary-General’s climate resilience champion, will be doing much more on this in the coming months.

**Plastic Pollution**

**6. Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle plastic pollution throughout the developing world.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): DFID is committed to helping developing countries tackle the problem of plastic pollution. We are spending up to £39 million to help poorer countries find practical ways to improve waste management and identify ways in which manufacturing processes can reduce plastic pollution.

Rebecca Pow: Does the Minister agree that we should increasingly put sustainability at the core of all our funding, particularly around plastics? For example, Tearfund is running projects that enable people to earn a living while cleaning up the planet. This is the direction we should be going in.

Harriett Baldwin: Of course, all our work is designed to achieve the sustainable development goals, so sustainability is crucial. Tearfund has done some amazing projects, and I am delighted today that we are announcing that we will match fund a WasteAid project in Cameroon that will help with exactly what my hon. Friend refers to—people earning a living from cleaning up plastic and stopping it going into our oceans.

UK Companies: Contracts

7. Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): What proportion of contracts her Department has awarded to UK companies in each of the past five years. [910647]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): DFID has awarded more than 80% of its contracts to UK-registered companies in each of the last five years.

Sir Hugo Swire: One of the achievements this Conservative party can be most proud of is its aid budget and the fact last year Britain was the only member of the G7 to meet the UN target of spending 0.7% of GDP on foreign aid—an astonishing £13.9 billion. Of course, this attracts criticism in some quarters. Does the Minister agree that one way to negate some of the criticism of the perceived largesse of taxpayer money would be to encourage proactively more British companies to win some of those contracts, without of course contravening state aid rules?

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight this point. In fact, I think we are the only country in the world to have put that 0.7% figure into statute. He will see from the numbers that in open competition 80% of our contracts have been awarded to UK-registered firms, but of course we would like to see more and smaller companies, and our procurement team has been out on a range of regional tours across this land to encourage more people to bid for our contracts.

Occupied Palestinian Territories

8. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the effect of restricted humanitarian space on the work of non-governmental organisations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [910648]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): This is World Immunisation Week, and polio is on the brink of becoming the second human disease in history to be eradicated. The United Kingdom remains committed to that effort, helping countries such as Pakistan to reach every child with life-saving vaccinations. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing deep sadness at the recent attacks on polio workers in Pakistan, which resulted in the deaths of two police officers and one polio vaccinator. Those tragic deaths highlight the immense personal bravery displayed by the people who deliver immunisations, and their commitment to ensuring that every child can be protected.

Sir David Amess: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating my constituent Unathi Ndlwana on setting up the Funda Trust to improve educational opportunities for young people in South Africa, in memory of the loss of her child? Following the excellent meeting with my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa, any help that the Department could give us would be excellent.

Penny Mordaunt: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in commending the work of the Trust. My hon. Friend the Minister for Africa has told me about that ongoing work. There is real concern that not enough is being done to help the people of Mozambique, particularly now that...
Cyclone Kenneth has struck. What is the Minister doing to ensure that global communities step up their response to the first cyclone relief fund, and do all that they can to remedy this humanitarian disaster?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, but I think we can be very proud of the work that the UK team in Mozambique is doing to deal not only with Cyclone Idai but, now, with Cyclone Kenneth. The team has been at the forefront in providing practical and financial assistance. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State held a meeting at the World Bank the week before last to look into attracting other donors to make longer-term reconstruction investments in Mozambique.

T3. [910658] Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It was World Malaria Day last week. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the UK’s contribution to the global fight against this preventable disease, which kills hundreds of thousands of children every year?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his leadership in this area. He has personally visited victims of malaria, and I know that he champions the UK’s leadership role and the £500 million a year that we are spending on preventing this terrible disease, which leads to the death of a child every two minutes in our world.

T4. [910659] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State proud of the fact that the Home Office has denied a visa to the father of the chief executive of the Scottish Refugee Council, which means that he cannot travel from Afghanistan to see his son receive an honorary doctorate at the University of Glasgow? What message is sent to developing countries and developing democracies when the UK routinely denies visas to people who want to contribute to our society and tackle poverty around the world?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I regularly have discussions with counterparts in those nations to encourage them to disburse funds, most recently with my Emirati opposite number; I had discussions with her about precisely that point this week.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): A large number of Israeli and Palestinian non-governmental organisations pursue partisan and divisive agendas in the west bank, many of which exacerbate tensions for their own ends. Does my right hon. Friend agree that NGOs that advocate boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel, which the Government have taken firm action on, should be opposed?

Penny Mordaunt: We want to ensure that any partner we work with is exhibiting all behaviours needed to get good things to happen, so, absolutely, that is our policy and it is the policy of the organisations we work with.

T7. [910662] Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am sure you are aware Mr Speaker, that the newly elected President of the Gambia is an avid Arsenal fan, but can the Secretary of State tell us what country-specific direct support she is giving to help the Gambia rebuild its economy and democracy?

Harriett Baldwin: Many Presidents across many African countries support a range of different teams, and this is a huge part of the work we do because it touches on so many young people as well. In the light of Soccer Aid last year, I pay tribute to the President of Gambia. Of course DFID has a range of programmes in Gambia, but through Soccer Aid we were able to raise lots of money from football fans, and I think everyone should welcome that.

Mr Speaker: A wonderfully diplomatic response on which the Minister should, I am sure, be congratulated.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is right to draw attention to the dangers of the anti-vaccination campaigns. In addition to thanking health workers across the world for their bravery in countering them, will she ensure the UK leads a vigorous response internationally to turn back a tide that is threatening not only those who would be vaccinated themselves but the communities around them, as we all depend on vaccination for our common safety?

Penny Mordaunt: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend and would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to him for leading the humanitarian work in my Department and for his tenure as Minister for the Middle East. I recently commissioned new programming to look at how we can help communities have trust in immunisation programmes. We are so close to eradicating polio from the earth and it would be appalling if we pulled back and rolled back from that now.
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The medieval guardianship system, whereby a woman is owned by her closest male relative, means women in Saudi Arabia cannot travel, play sports or do a whole range of things we take for granted without permission from their male “owners”. Given that women who seek any level of gender equality and human rights face unprecedented danger and abuse in Saudi Arabia, will the Secretary of State condemn Saudi Arabia for treating women as mere chattels?

Penny Mordaunt: It is absolutely right that we call out behaviour that does not support or empower women or enable them to make the choices they want to in their lives. I am proud of the work that not only my Department but other Departments have done on that, and we will continue it. I call on all nations to make sure that at every opportunity we ensure women’s rights are in summit communiqués and absolutely everything else, and are a core part of every activity we do.

Mr Speaker: Order. The students and staff of Fitzwaryn School in Wantage, which I had the pleasure of visiting recently, are attending Prime Minister’s questions today and I feel sure that Members across the House will want to welcome them. In particular, I extend a very warm welcome to Charlie Butler and his twin brother Tom, who celebrate their 13th birthday this Sunday.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910625] John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 1 May.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that Members across the whole House are always pleased when young people take an interest in and attend the proceedings of this Chamber, as those from Fitzwaryn School are doing today.

I am sure that Members across the House will also want to join me in sending my best wishes to the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), and her Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who completed the marathon with the fastest time of any Member of Parliament—[Interruption.] Just for those who are suggesting otherwise—no, I was not chasing him at the time.

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.

John Lamont: I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s comments, and I promise to train much harder for next year.

On this day in 1707, Scotland and England came together to form the United Kingdom. Does the Prime Minister agree that this Union has served our country well? Most people in Scotland agree with that. Does she further agree that, rather than obsessing over independence, Nicola Sturgeon should get on with her day job and end her neglect of Scotland’s NHS, schools and economy?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I congratulate my hon. Friend on running the London marathon and on all the money he raised for Marie Curie on his run. I also thank him for highlighting this anniversary. I am sure that all Members across the House will want to join me in marking it. He is absolutely right to say that under the Scottish National party in government in Scotland, we are seeing public services getting worse because the SNP is focusing on holding another independence referendum. As my hon. Friend says, it is the time the SNP stopped ignoring those millions of Scots who do not want another independence referendum and got on with the day job of focusing on the issues that matter to people, such as schools and the economy.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in congratulating all those who ran the London marathon. I think that the shadow Health Secretary getting a personal best shows just how fit the Labour Health team is.

I should like to take this opportunity to wish the House and people across the country a very happy May Day on International Workers Day.

Tomorrow, many people across England will go to the polls to vote in local elections. For many of them, the Government have delivered nothing but failure. On her first day in office, the Prime Minister promised to fight against the “burning” social “injustices” that plague our society. Yesterday, an independent Government body confirmed that inequality was entrenched in our society from birth to work. Will the Prime Minister now admit that her Government have completely failed to take action to tackle the burning injustices?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman did not take the opportunity to welcome the anniversary of the Union between Scotland and England. I have to say that I think this is the first time that he has not welcomed or congratulated a union in this House.

The reality is that social mobility, so I remind him that Dame Martina of the Social Mobility Commission said yesterday in relation to the report that she sensed that there is a “real commitment” in Government to try to make a difference in this area. I want everyone to have the opportunity to reach their potential whatever their background, and that is why we are improving education, helping to create higher-paid jobs and boosting home ownership. What would the right hon. Gentleman’s party offer young people? Failed policies, broken promises and piles of debt—just a millstone around their neck.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that social mobility is going backwards and things are getting worse under this Government. I will give an example: life expectancy in Britain is falling for the first time since 1945. Where does the Prime Minister think this Government have gone wrong when we have reached the point where people now expect to live shorter lives than others did in the past?
The Prime Minister: It is not the case that people now expect to live shorter lives than in the past. We have been ensuring that we provide for people at every stage of their lives. For young people in particular, we are ensuring that they have the opportunities to lead full and healthy lives into the future. That is why all the actions we are taking across the board are ensuring that there are jobs for people, ensuring that those jobs are better, ensuring that people are encouraged to get into the workplace, and ensuring that we provide for them not just through the welfare system but with our long-term plan for the national health service. At every stage of life, we are ensuring that we as Conservatives are improving people’s lives. In so many of those areas, the right hon. Gentleman has done nothing but vote against the policies that this Conservative Government have produced.

Jeremy Corbyn: Life expectancy has fallen by six months, and infant mortality is up and rising. This month, we also learned that a record 1.6 million food parcels were given out last year alone. Under this Government, things are getting worse. Does the Prime Minister agree with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that this Government’s policies have meant that, in one of the richest countries on earth, food banks are now handing 14 million meals a year to people, some of whom are in work, who simply do not have enough to eat?

The Prime Minister: The best route out of poverty for people—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm itself. We are at an early stage. The question has been put, and the answer from the Prime Minister must be heard.

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm itself. We are at an early stage. The question has been put, and the answer from the Prime Minister must be heard.

The Prime Minister: The best route out of poverty for people is to be in the workplace. We want to ensure that more, better-paid jobs are being created for people in this country, and that is what we are seeing under this Government. Record numbers of people are in employment, real wages are rising for the first time in a decade, and this Government are taking decisions that are helping people to keep more money in their pockets. Tax cuts for 32 million people, an increase in the national living wage, and a freeze in fuel duty have all been of major benefit to people, and what did the right hon. Gentleman do? He voted against fuel duty freezes and tax cuts over a dozen times.

Jeremy Corbyn: Many of those people receiving food parcels, the number of which has increased by 600,000 in four years, are actually in work, and that is down to their low wages. Indeed, wages have been frozen for many over the past 10 years. Even the Prime Minister’s own Secretary of State admitted that universal credit has caused people to rely on food banks.

The number of older people now not getting the care they desperately need has risen to 1.4 million. Think about that—1.4 million people in need of social care. Things are getting worse. Does the Prime Minister agree with Labour’s plan to fund social care properly or with her former deputy, who wants to tax the over-50s and take away their benefits?

The Prime Minister: As I have said on a number of occasions in this House, we agree that we need to ensure there is a sustainable, long-term future for social care, and we will be bringing forward proposals in relation to that. We have given councils access to nearly £4 billion more for adult social care this year, which means a 9% increase, in real terms, in funding for adult social care between 2015-16 and 2019-20. But it is not just about the funding that goes into social care—[Interruption.]

Lots of Labour Members are saying, yes it is. Actually, no, it is about ensuring that best practice is seen across local authorities and NHS trusts. That is why this is not just about funding for social care and local authorities. It is also about our long-term plan for the national health service—the biggest cash boost in the national health service’s history—stability for the NHS, improving social care and providing for people in their old age.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister seems to have her head in the sand. The reality is that £7 billion has been cut from adult social care since 2010. The system is teetering on the brink of collapse as care companies go into administration, and the stress on the residents of those homes and their families is unbelievable. We need a serious strategy that ensures people get the social care they need when they need it.

Under this Government, things are getting worse on our streets, too. Violent crime is up by 19%, robberies are up by 18%, knife crime is at the highest level on record and 2.3 million criminal investigations have closed because the police were unable to identify a suspect—I believe because they have insufficient staff to do it.

Does the Prime Minister accept there is a violent crime epidemic that has arisen on her watch and is tearing our communities and our families apart? It has to be addressed by investment in our communities.

The Prime Minister: May I first say to the right hon. Gentleman—he made a reference to care companies at the beginning of his question, with a suggestion that this is a worrying time for all those who are in provision provided by those care companies—that, of course, it is a concerning time for them, for their families and for the employees of the company concerned? I think he was referring to Four Seasons. The Care Quality Commission is absolutely clear that there is no risk of service disruption at this time, and there should never be a gap in care for an individual. The Care Act 2014, introduced by the Conservatives in government, places a duty on local authorities to intervene to protect individuals where their provider is unable to carry on their care because of business failure.

The right hon. Gentleman went on to talk about the issue of crime. First, we see from the crime survey that, overall, crime is down by a third. He quotes the figures from police-recorded crime. He has previously been hauled up by, I think, the UK Statistics Authority for failing to quote the crime survey and for only quoting police-recorded crime. He talks about more money being available to the police and there is around £1 billion more money available to the police this year. Police and crime commissioners plan to recruit 3,000 more police officers. But, to tackle knife crime and serious violence—yes, we are concerned about it, which is why we brought forward the serious violence strategy—we also need to deal with drug crime, turn young people away from violence and ensure that the police and others have the powers to do their job.
I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I will take no lectures on this from somebody who voted against more money for the police and voted against tougher laws on knife crime, because that is not helping the police or our citizens.

Jeremy Corbyn: If the Prime Minister does not believe me, perhaps she will believe her own Home Secretary. He said in March:

‘Serious violence is on the rise. Communities are being torn apart and families are losing their children.’—[Official Report, 4 March 2019; Vol. 655, c. 667.]

Twenty-one thousand fewer police officers is a pretty obvious connection: there is likely to be a rise in crime and disorder as a result.

Under this Government, things in this country are getting worse. Their cuts and incompetence have left communities struggling and pushed public services into crisis. They have cut council budgets by 50%, poverty is up, waiting times are up and violent crime is up, all under a Government who seem to care more about pushing their very damaging austerity agenda than tackling the burning social injustices. Ahead of tomorrow’s elections in England, can the Prime Minister explain why, from social care to crime and from life expectancy to poverty, things are getting worse under her Government?

The Prime Minister: We have seen the biggest cash boost to the NHS in its history under this Conservative Government, more people in work than ever before and more children in good and outstanding schools getting opportunities for their futures. And what do we see from Conservative councils up and down the country? Conservative councils give better services, they recycle more, they fix more potholes and they charge lower taxes. A vote for Labour is a vote for mismanagement, worse services and higher taxes. It is Conservative councils which give better services and charge you less.

Q3. [910627] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Would the Prime Minister confirm her support for Transport for the North’s strategic transport plan, which will help to create an additional 850,000 jobs and £100 billion of economic growth by 2050 by connecting the key cities of the north through Northern Powerhouse Rail and improving key trunk roads, such as the A64, which runs through the beautiful and economically stifled constituency of Thirsk and Malton?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. I want to continue to be able to welcome those who want to come to the UK in accordance with our immigration rules. I understand that, as part of its extensive programme of engagement around the future border and immigration system, the Home Office will talk to representatives of a range of faiths and community groups, and those discussions will include the future visa arrangements for ministers of religion.
Q2. [910626] Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Last week, in a public meeting in Stockton South, I heard a community that is fed up with rising levels of crime and antisocial behaviour. I heard about a lady in her 90s who is terrified in her own home. Residents in another part of my constituency have taken to carrying out their own street patrols. Cleveland police, my local force, have to contend with the fourth highest crime rate in the country, but have lost 500 officers because of cuts. My constituents have asked me to come here to ask the Prime Minister to look again at the funding needs of Cleveland police—will she do so?

The Prime Minister: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, who I understand was another of the London marathon runners on Sunday.

We are making more money available to local police forces, and around the country a number of police and crime commissioners are recruiting more police officers, but dealing with crime and antisocial behaviour is not just about policing. It is about how we ensure that we turn young people away from such behaviour and away from violence. That involves a wider range of activities, which is why, together with the Home Secretary and other Secretaries of State, I held the summit on serious violence and knife crime last month. That brought together people from all organisations—from community organisations and charities, as well as police forces and others—to ensure that we can tackle what is a whole-of-Government and whole-of-society issue.

Q8. [910633] Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): In 2017, my constituent Rebecca Kruza tragically took her own life. She had her whole life ahead of her but suffered from post-natal depression. Her son will now grow up never knowing his mother. Many mothers who return to work suffer mental health challenges while seeking to juggle the demands of work and parenting. Today is World Maternal Mental Health Day. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to do more to support the mental health of parents and mothers when they return to work, and why? Will she back Rebecca’s family’s campaign for more support for mental health of parents and mothers and baby mental healthcare units in Kent and throughout the country as a whole?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I send my condolences to his constituent’s family, particularly that young son who will grow up without his mother. The issue of post-natal depression and people returning to work and balancing childcare and work responsibilities is important. We are looking into a new returners programme to help those who are returning to the workplace. My hon. Friend the Minister for Mental Health is doing some good work on the whole question of mental health provision, particularly for mothers with young babies. It is right for my hon. Friend to have raised this area of concern, which the Government are looking at in a number of ways. We will aim to ensure that nobody else suffers in the way that his constituent and her family did.

Q5. [910629] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Prime Minister will not be surprised to learn that I would like her finally to spill the beans on Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ visiting Downing Street. For more than a year now, I have been asking why these shadowy organisations were invited into the heart of her Government, and she has been refusing to answer. When I write to her, a junior Minister responds and says there is nothing to reveal—most recently they said that no meetings took place—but I now have a written answer from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office saying that Ministers and officials had a series of meetings with Cambridge Analytica. Will the Prime Minister finally come clean? Which of her Ministers, special advisers and officials have met AIQ or Cambridge Analytica; where and when did those meetings take place; and what was their purpose?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has consistently stood up and asked me about meetings that took place in No. 10 and she has had answers about meetings that took place in No. 10. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Constitution has written to her about this matter. We routinely publish information about Ministers’ and senior officials’ meetings with external organisations, and the correct information has been published in the transparency returns for my meetings. She might like to know that the UK Government actually publish far more transparency data than the Scottish Government.

Q13. [910638] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I have told the Financial Conduct Authority that one of the companies on its approved register owes millions of pounds, including money to the FCA itself. In the light of the collapse of another FCA-approved company a few weeks ago, leaving thousands without their life savings, will the Prime Minister find out what exactly the FCA actually does to regulate the companies on its approved register?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue and I am very happy to write to him with more detail in relation to the actions of the Financial Conduct Authority as it looks at those companies on its approved list. I think that it would be more helpful to him if I were able to give him a more detailed reply in writing.

Q6. [910630] Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): May I be lucky enough to be one of the 27% who get their question answered by this Prime Minister? Payday loans disproportionately affect the vulnerable and the Motherwell postcode has the largest payday loans per head in Scotland. As this Government’s universal credit system is forcing people to turn to these high-interest lenders, will she halt the roll-out of universal credit and take action on the vultures in these companies who prey on the most desperate in our society?

The Prime Minister: On the issue of universal credit, this Government have changed the way it operates in rolling it out. We have ensured that somebody moving on to universal credit can get 100% advance payment where that is necessary for them. May I also remind the hon. Lady that the Scottish Government now have extra powers in relation to welfare, which, so far, they have been reluctant to use?

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for asking Fitzwaryn School in my constituency to Parliament today? It is an excellent school with excellent pupils and outstanding teachers. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the...
The Prime Minister: I join my right hon. Friend in congratulating the Education Secretary on the action that he is taking, on the attention that he is giving in ensuring that that funding is available across the school sector and that those schools where there are particular needs are able to be supported properly, and on recognising, as we have done, the particular needs of schools in rural areas.

Q7. [910632] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): During the general election, the Prime Minister gave a manifesto commitment to retain free TV licences and bus passes. Does she still stand by that?

The Prime Minister: We do stand by the commitments that we made. Of course, we are changing the arrangements for the TV licences—that is going to the BBC—but there is no reason why the BBC, with the money available to it, is not able to continue that.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Will the Prime Minister welcome the first ever training session in the House of Commons on understanding autism, which is being held today and for which 59 colleagues have signed up? Each of us has around 1,000 people in our constituency who are on the autistic spectrum, so it is vital that Members of Parliament understand what life can be like for people with autism and that they can provide their constituents with even better services with that understanding.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that matter. She has raised the issue with me in the past, when I think I welcomed the suggestion to have these courses available to Members of Parliament. It is very important and I congratulate the 59 Members who have signed up for the course today. It is important that we are all able to provide that support and to understand rather better for those who come to our surgeries and whom we meet in our constituencies the challenges that they face.

Q9. [910634] Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister commit herself here and now to fly the flag and to build the three Royal Navy supply ships in British yards, including on the Tyne, by reversing the unpatriotic decision to put this out to international tender?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have taken shipbuilding in the United Kingdom incredibly seriously by publishing a shipbuilding strategy, which aims to ensure that we can enhance the capabilities of shipbuilding yards. Individual decisions are taken in relation to Royal Navy ships, but it is important that we have an overall strategy to encourage shipbuilding around the country.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My constituent Jadwinder Singh Bhogal went on holiday to Dubai and never came home. He was arrested, made to sign a confession in Arabic and convicted of cocaine possession, despite no drugs or evidence of drugs being found on him. He is now serving 25 years in a Dubai jail. We applied, under the prisoner transfer agreement, for him to serve his sentence in the UK so that his elderly, frail mother could see her only son. This application was refused, as it appears all other applications have been since the PTA was signed by the United Arab Emirates in 2013. Is that PTA worth the paper it is written on?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the hon. Lady’s concern about the case she has raised. I will ask Ministers in the Ministry of Justice and the Foreign Office to look at the issue and get back to her on it. When these PTAs are signed, we expect that they will do the job that they are intended to in enabling prisoner transfers, but I will ask that the relevant Minister write to the hon. Lady on her specific case.

Q10. [910635] Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): In March 2014, my constituent Jadwinder Singh Bhogal went on holiday to Dubai and never came home. He was arrested, made to sign a confession in Arabic and convicted of cocaine possession, despite no drugs or evidence of drugs being found on him. He is now serving 25 years in a Dubai jail. We applied, under the prisoner transfer agreement, for him to serve his sentence in the UK so that his elderly, frail mother could see her only son. This application was refused, as it appears all other applications have been since the PTA was signed by the United Arab Emirates in 2013. Is that PTA worth the paper it is written on?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue and championing the campaign; I know that she has met Ministers to discuss it. We all agree that terminally ill people should not have to worry about their job, which is why the Dying to Work charter is so important and such a good example of supporting terminally ill workers. I am pleased to hear that the number of employees covered by the charter has now reached the 1 million mark. Employers are making commitments to their employees by signing the charter—that they will not be dismissed and that their families’ financial security will not be put at risk. I will ask a Minister to write to my hon. Friend about the related aspects of the disabilities Act and about looking at the issue in relation to legislation.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue and championing the campaign; I know that she has met Ministers to discuss it. We all agree that terminally ill people should not have to worry about their job, which is why the Dying to Work charter is so important and such a good example of supporting terminally ill workers. I am pleased to hear that the number of employees covered by the charter has now reached the 1 million mark. Employers are making commitments to their employees by signing the charter—that they will not be dismissed and that their families’ financial security will not be put at risk. I will ask a Minister to write to my hon. Friend about the related aspects of the disabilities Act and about looking at the issue in relation to legislation.

Tugendhat: Apart from an extraordinary leak, which I will not go into, the decision being discussed in many parts of the world is the possibility that we will be nesting a dragon in the critical national infrastructure of the UK by allowing Huawei to build the cyber-network that will power 5G. This decision is frankly extraordinary, given the advice of the National Security Agency in the United States and the Australian Signals Directorate. Could the Prime Minister explain why she feels that ignoring two of our closest intelligence allies and putting in danger a 70-year intelligence-sharing relationship that has underpinned the security of the UK is worth it for Chinese commercial gain?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to taking decisions, supported by a hard-headed, technically-informed assessment of the risk. We discuss security issues very closely with our allies. We have put in place a review of the 5G supply chain to ensure that we have a secure and resilient roll-out of 5G, and the decisions of that review will be announced in due course. Our priorities for the future of telecommunications are stronger cyber-security
practices, greater resilience in telecoms networks and diversity in the market, and those priorities drive our thinking.

Q11. [910636] Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Three weeks ago in this Chamber, I informed the Prime Minister that nearly 8,000 children in Preston are living in poverty—a significant amount of which is due to the roll-out of universal credit last year. In her response, the Prime Minister used the hackneyed phrase that families where both parents are in work are “five times less likely” to be in poverty. That is not an answer; it is a misleading statistic. Both parents working is not a guarantee that the family will not be living in poverty because of low pay. And what if only one parent is working, or it is a one-parent family? The Prime Minister knows that universal credit is not working for thousands of people in my constituency and millions of people up and down the country, and I believe the truth is that she does not care.

The Prime Minister: The reference I made to the impact of poverty on children living in a household where both parents are working is a correct one—that is a fact. What is also the case is that there are more people now receiving the full benefit to which they are entitled as a result of universal credit being introduced. We see disabled people in the household actually having access to more funding as a result of universal credit. Universal credit is ensuring that people not only get encouraged into the workplace, but when they are in the workplace they are able to keep more of the money that they earn. This is in direct contrast to a legacy system from Labour that meant that over a million people—1.4 million people—were left on benefits for nearly a decade.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): On the way up here this week, I received a telephone call from Dennis Hutchings. Dennis is 77 years old and he lives near Plymouth. He has just been charged with attempted murder from an incident in Northern Ireland 42 years ago. Dennis Hutchings is not alone; we have Soldier B and we have Soldier F. What is happening is in contradiction to what the Prime Minister herself personally promised on our conference stage two years ago. Could she inform people like Dennis of exactly what she has done, and what she is doing, to end this issue of what more can be done to ensure that service personnel are not unfairly pursued through the courts in relation to service overseas, including considering legislation.

Q12. [910637] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Frustratingly, this is now the third Prime Minister’s questions in which I have raised the plight of fellow parents of premature and sick babies. Last time, the Prime Minister told the House that the Government were undertaking “a short, focused internal review of provision for parents of premature, sick and multiple babies to obtain an understanding of the barriers to participating in the labour market.”—[Official Report, 20 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1467.]

So when will the Government publish the findings of that review and finally take action for us?

The Prime Minister: First, may I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, because I understand that he was another of the Members who ran the marathon on Sunday? I understand that he did it in support of Glasgow Girls football club and raised money for that very good cause.

Officials in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are undertaking a short, focused internal review of provision for parents of premature, sick and multiple babies. They are looking at the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised—at the barriers to returning to work and staying in work that some parents can face. They have been working with organisations such as Bliss, The Smallest Things and Tamba to better understand the issues for parents. I am sure that a Minister will be happy to meet him in due course when these conclusions are reached.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has now been in prison in Tehran for more than three years, deprived of the presence of her family. Will the Prime Minister join me in assuring her, and all those who are unjustly imprisoned overseas, as the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) mentioned earlier, that they are not forgotten in this House? Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what measures are being taken to ensure that Nazanin can come home as soon as possible, and, in the meantime, get the medical treatment she so desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: Let me first give the general reassurance that my hon. Friend asked for that these cases are not forgotten—that they continue to be worked on by Ministers and officials. Nazanin’s case and others, in relation to Iran, I raise whenever I see President Rouhani. I raise these issues and the Foreign Secretary raises them with his opposite numbers. We are constantly raising these issues, but we are also ensuring that, in terms of our presence in Iran, people are working with the Iranian authorities as far as possible to ensure that the necessary medical assistance is provided to Nazanin, and indeed that others are supported in the way that they need to be. I can assure my hon. Friend that these cases are not forgotten. We continue to work on them and continue to raise them regularly with the Iranian authorities.
Q14. [910639] Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I know that the Prime Minister understands the importance of women attending their cervical smear tests, and I am sure she is aware that, because of a recent public health campaign, our cervical smear laboratories are overwhelmed. Would she care to comment on the recent tendering process for cytology services in England, which will see the number of laboratories reduced from 46 to nine?

The Prime Minister: The question is, what capability—what capacity—will there be for the cases to be properly dealt with? The Department of Health and Social Care and those who are undertaking this are well aware of the requirement in terms of numbers. Like the hon. Lady, I welcome the public health campaign on cervical smears. This is very important. I want to see more women going to have their smear, because it can save their lives.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): While Arsenal may be chasing a Champions League spot, Ilkeston Town are celebrating their promotion to the Evo-Stik League division one east. Will my right hon. Friend outline what the Government are doing to support grassroots football, which is so vital to our communities, and will she join me in congratulating the Robins and wish them every success next season?

The Prime Minister: First, I congratulate Ilkeston Town on their promotion, and I wish the Robins all the best for the next season. That is a good example of how grassroots football can benefit local communities, and it is important that we are putting more money in. Over four years, almost £100 million of public money is being used to help build and upgrade artificial and grass pitches, encourage greater participation and enhance coaching programmes. That includes creating new and improving existing community football facilities through the Football Foundation. We are committed to playing our part in improving and strengthening grassroots football in this country, and the Robins are playing their part in showing the benefit that has for local communities.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Prime Minister accept that the growing warnings about a climate emergency require a fresh approach to highly polluting but rapidly growing sectors such as aviation? In particular, should not the control of carbon emissions and air quality take precedence over the expansion ambitions of the commercial owners of Heathrow?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we take issues around emissions, and climate change generally, incredibly seriously. We have consistently said that climate change is one of the greatest challenges that the world faces. That is why I am proud of this Government’s record on dealing with climate change. Since 2010, we have been decarbonising our economy faster than any other G20 economy. We are at the leading edge of industrialised nations in dealing with these issues, and we will continue to do so.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Music Man Project for people with learning difficulties on their triumphant performance at the Albert Hall, and I am glad that a number of colleagues were present. Is that not yet another reason that Southend should become a city?

The Prime Minister: First, I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Music Man Project on their performance and wishing them all the best for their trip to Broadway. Opportunities like that are very important for musicians with disabilities, and they are paving the way and showing the excellent work that can be done, and the enjoyment and excitement that those musicians can get through those performances. I do not think that my hon. Friend has asked me a single question about the 1990s it paid full compensation. Why can we not do the same in the United Kingdom?

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Yesterday saw the first harrowing testimonies of those who were infected in the infected NHS blood scandal. Since the Prime Minister announced the public inquiry in July 2017, one victim has died every four days. Delay is not acceptable. In the Republic of Ireland, it was accepted that it was known that there were risks, and in the 1990s it paid full compensation. Why can we not do the same in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: First, may I commend the hon. Lady for the work that she has done with others in this House to ensure that that inquiry is taking place? It is of course an independent inquiry. We are ensuring that the inquiry is provided with all the resources that it needs—that the chairman of the inquiry requires and identifies as being needed for that inquiry. She is absolutely right that this is something that should have taken place earlier and, as she said, there are those who have died since the start of the campaign to ensure that this inquiry could be held. It is important that we get to the bottom of this issue, and that is why we are ensuring that the inquiry is not only independent, but does have the resources it needs.
The agreement with British Steel relates to its obligations under the EU emissions trading scheme. The ETS requires heavy industry and power producers to obtain and surrender allowances equal to their level of carbon emissions on an annual basis. Companies that are the most exposed to international competition are allocated a proportion of free ETS allowances annually. For years, many companies have used these free allowances to comply with their obligations for the previous year.

Just over four months ago, in December 2018, the European Commission suspended the UK’s ability to auction ETS allowances until the withdrawal agreement is ratified. This was decided in order to maintain the integrity of the European carbon market in the event that the UK left the EU without a deal on 29 March this year. This position means that free allowances for 2019 have not yet been issued.

The withdrawal agreement negotiated with the European Union allows for full and continuing membership of the EU ETS until the end of December 2020. Therefore, once ratified, we will have the full legal basis immediately to issue free 2019 allowances. However, the decision of this House not to vote in favour of the withdrawal agreement means that it has not yet been possible to proceed on this basis. This has meant that UK businesses have unexpectedly, since December, been left without access to 2019 free allowances. All members of this House should reflect on the real-world impacts of decisions that we make in this place, or the lack of them, on the businesses on which many thousands of jobs and whole towns depend.

Despite the continued uncertainty, all UK installations have now met their 2018 obligations in full—before yesterday’s compliance deadline of midnight last night. My Department reminded all participants that they still had a legal duty to meet their obligations for 2018 and that the UK is committed to upholding our environmental standards and continuing to comply fully with European law while we remain a member of the EU.

However, until this week, British Steel had not complied with its obligations. British Steel, as many Members know, employs 4,200 people directly in the UK—in Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and Redcar—and thousands more in its associated supply chains. As the second biggest steel maker in the UK and one of only two integrated steel-making sites in the UK, the assets at Scunthorpe and in the north-east are of significant importance to the UK. They are a major supplier to rail networks across Britain. As the only UK steel plant that produces the rails used on our tracks, they provide almost all those procured by Network Rail, as well as supplying ScotRail, Transport for London and Translink in Northern Ireland, and they export a large volume of their product across Europe.

British Steel approached my Department earlier this year to explain that the absence of the expected 2019 free allowances left it unable to comply with its 2018 obligations. If it had failed to do so by last night’s deadline, it would have attracted an immediate and unremovable fine of £500 million, on top of the continuing liability of about £120 million, putting the company under significant financial strain.

The Government were therefore left with a choice: either to see British Steel be unable to comply with its legally binding obligations, creating a liability of over £600 million; or to consider whether there was a path to allow it to comply within the strict bounds of what is possible under domestic and European law. After careful consideration, the Government took the decision to enter into a short-term bridge facility, valued at about £120 million, under section 7 of the Industrial Development Act 1982, at an interest rate of LIBOR plus 7%.

The effect of this agreement is that the Government have, in the last week, purchased the necessary emissions allowances on behalf of British Steel. In return, under a deed of forfeiture, ownership of the company’s 2019 allowances will now be transferred to the Government once they are released. Through the subsequent sale of these 2019 allowances, we expect the taxpayer to be repaid in full. The 2019 allowances are more than are needed to fulfil the 2018 obligations, and all of them will come to the Government.

The terms of the deal ensure that if the price of allowances were to rise, the taxpayer would receive half of any financial upside once the allowances are sold back into the market. To ensure the taxpayer is protected in the event that allowances were to fall, under the terms of the deal, British Steel has been required to underwrite any shortfall and is covering the cost of arranging the facility. The price of carbon allowances has been rising over the past two years, and the Exchequer received £1.4 billion from auctioning allowances in 2018, up from £533 million in 2017.

In the unlikely event that we leave the EU without a deal, we are engaging with the Commission about the implications for our continued participation in the EU ETS. However, should an agreement not be reached, the Government are able to implement a domestic scheme that provides security against the loss of EU-derived allowances. I can confirm to the House that, following the purchase of the necessary allowances, British Steel has been able to comply with its 2018 EU ETS obligations in full.

I want to be clear with the House that the agreement reached with British Steel is a unique one in exceptional circumstances. My Department’s assessment, which has been agreed with the Treasury, shows that the deed of forfeiture offers value for money to the taxpayer, with benefits exceeding the costs—meeting the accounting officer test. This is set against the alternative of British Steel failing to comply and causing a business with an annual turnover of £1.4 billion to have an instant £600 million financial pressure.

This position was supported by the independent Industrial Development Advisory Board, which assessed the proposal in its statutory role and agreed with the
value-for-money assessment. I am placing in the Libraries of both Houses a copy of my accounting officer’s letter to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee and the Comptroller and Auditor General, and I have written to the Chairs of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and of the Treasury Committee. I have been advised that the arrangement is fully compliant with the state aid rules that apply to the steel sector, which require its terms to be commercially comparable.

While this was an unenviable situation to face, the Government believe that the agreement reached with British Steel to ensure that it could comply with its legal obligations represents a responsible course of action. I hope this is a view that Members across this House will also support, and I commend this statement to the House.

12.58 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): A number of industry voices have welcomed this announcement. As Unite the union has commented today, British Steel workers and those in the supply chain will be breathing a sigh of relief at this loan. However, it is regrettable that the Government’s handling of the Brexit negotiations has brought us to this point. The Government have been warned about the uncertainty over the EU ETS for over two years, and the Prime Minister’s threats of a no-deal Brexit for over two years have caused significant uncertainty for the steel sector. UK Steel, the body representing the sector, warned in January that a no-deal Brexit was nothing short of a disaster for the sector, but despite the warnings, the Prime Minister ploughed on and the risks to the viability of our manufacturing sector have been plain to see.

This has had an impact on British industry, as it continues to fight off uncertainty. That is why it is imperative that we continue in this House to work across parties for a solution that will reach a consensus: I know that the Secretary of State is committed to that. But he must also note that this is part of a long track record of this Government standing by as our manufacturing faces increasing pressures, both domestically and internationally.

When Donald Trump imposed a 25% tariff on our steel, the Government’s response was lukewarm at best, and the Prime Minister’s refusal to fight for the sector was telling. The Government’s Trade Bill is set to make the sector even more vulnerable to steel dumping. The Government have been woefully silent on the steel sector deal proposals from industry and unions about the issues that are stifling competition, such as electricity prices: UK industries pay up to 50% more than their European counterparts. Furthermore, the Trade Remedies Authority has been described by the Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance as possibly the weakest in the world.

Will the Secretary of State provide some clarity for the steel sector today by describing the measures that his Government will take to ensure that the UK’s low carbon infrastructure, such as offshore wind turbines, and other projects, such as the Royal Navy’s new fleet solid support ships, are built using UK steel? Will he confirm what action he is taking on publishing a steel sector deal and incentivising both public and private investment in the sector? Will he also confirm what action he is taking on business rates and energy costs right across the sector?

This is welcome news, but as I have said it is not enough on its own to provide the certainty and assurances that workers and businesses right across the steel sector need. I know that the Secretary of State shares my belief that steel is one of the jewels in the crown of British manufacturing, and I hope he can assure the House today that this is just the first step in a long list of policies dedicated to supporting the sector going forward.

Greg Clark: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome for the steps that we have taken. She is absolutely right that if a Brexit deal had been agreed, this would not have been necessary: the deal that has been proposed and voted on three times in this House would have made this statement unnecessary. I gently point out to her that the company itself, British Steel, wrote to constituency Members in December last year, when the agreement had been reached in the European Council, saying in terms:

“We believe the deal that has been tabled and agreed with the EU is within the best interest of UK business”

—British Steel—

“and we urge you to think about voting in favour of the deal.”

Unfortunately, there was not a majority in the House for the deal, and part of the problem was that Opposition Members did not vote for it. I welcome the constructive discussions that the hon. Lady and I have been having during that time.

I also take issue with what the hon. Lady said about standing by. I do not think anyone could describe this initiative as “standing by”—quite the reverse: it is an agile response to an unwelcome situation, and I would have thought that she would commend it. She was not in the House at the time, but I remember well when the steel making on Teesside was substantially closed down, mothballed, during the last Labour Government, without such a response to do what we could to keep it in operation.

On energy prices and suchlike, I should say that under the last Labour Government steel production and employment in steelmaking in this country fell by 50%.

Rebecca Long Bailey: We don’t need a history lesson!

Greg Clark: Well, history is important in this because one of the reasons why our electricity prices have been high compared with others is that in the last five years of the previous Labour Government, industrial electricity prices rose by 64%. What we have done since then is provide £291 million in compensation for energy-intensive sectors, to correct some of the inflation that took place during that time.

As the hon. Lady knows and has acknowledged, my firm view is that in a world where manufacturing in this country and its opportunities around the world are undergoing a revival, there is absolutely no reason whatever why British Steel should not make a major contribution to that, right across the country. I am keen that we should conclude a sector deal with the steel sector.
There have been important discussions. All sector deals require co-investment from the Government and the companies. No one is keener than I am to conclude one: as I hope is evident from my statement today, I am prepared to act in support of a sector that is important—not just for the economy, but for the towns across the country in whose lives it plays such a prominent role.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): If the Government had kept their word and taken us out on 29 March without the withdrawal agreement but tabled a comprehensive free trade agreement, we would not be in this mess. What are the Government going to do to have a proper industrial strategy, which can work only if there are more adequate supplies of much cheaper power?

**Greg Clark**: What my right hon. Friend has said is not the case. Our legal obligations for 2018 would be there, and the company would have to comply. Had we left without a deal, the company would be in the position that it is in.

When it comes to the competitiveness of the UK steel sector, it is clear that the markets are international and, especially in the case of British Steel, very substantially across the continent of Europe. It has been very clear that we need to make sure that we continue to trade on terms at least as favourable as we do at the moment with the European Union, which is why both British Steel as a company and the steel sector have been absolutely clear, in terms, that we need to ratify an agreement such as has been proposed, and we need to do it very quickly.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement. I also put on the record my welcome for the action taken by the Government to protect 4,200 jobs; it is really important that we protect the remaining heavy industry and manufacturing facilities in the UK. That said, questions still need to be answered. The Secretary of State confirms that this is a loan, on commercial terms, to avoid the risk of a fine of half a billion pounds to British Steel. To mitigate that risk of a fine, what was to prevent British Steel from just borrowing from the market, given that it is borrowing from the Government on commercial terms? Why did this go to the eleventh hour? It seems that what is almost a gamble has been taken with British Steel in the discussions with the Government. Will the right hon. Gentleman explain that? Were the risks identified when the Government were negotiating the extension to article 50?

In his statement, the Secretary of State talked about the need for Members to reflect on the impact of decisions or non-decisions in this place. That seems like another classic attempt to blame other Members for the Brexit mess we are in. It is not our fault—there has been a lack of leadership from the Government. For two years, the Prime Minister was telling us that no deal was much better than a bad deal, then all of sudden, near the end, it was “my deal or no way at all.” That withdrawal agreement suffered the biggest parliamentary defeat in history. Surely, the Government should have reflected on that, instead of coming back here time and again and blaming this House for the Brexit mess.

The situation is further amplified by the fact that the statement says that in the case of no deal the Government are working with the Commission about future participation in the EU ETS scheme. Surely, if the Government had made preparations for a no-deal Brexit those discussions would have already been concluded and a way forward identified.

How do we get transparency and discussions with Government and industry for companies such as British Steel and Nissan, for which back-door deals were done previously? Who misses out? How are these companies identified? Why, for example, was it left to the SNP Scottish Government, rather than the UK Government, to protect Scottish steel?

Finally, this situation proves the need for proper investment in carbon capture and storage. Peterhead has sufficient storage, and it will be ready to be utilised and operational by 2023-24. That would tie in with the Teesside cluster and help the steel industry. If the Government can find £100 million overnight for a loan, why do they not find further money for direct strategic investment, which will help heavy industry and the low carbon position?

**Greg Clark**: The hon. Gentleman started out welcoming the action we have taken and ended up, it seems, withdrawing that support. I will take the first half of his statement at face value and recognise that we have taken action to deal with an unusual and urgent problem, and have done so in a way that I think has displayed some agility. Advice has been taken, which will be fully disclosed to the Committees of the House, on the terms of the agreement and how it can be commercially benchmarked. Clearly, borrowing against allowances with a short period of time before the deadline—it is in the company’s gift and the company’s obligation to comply—requires moving quickly. The judgement we took was that we wanted to make sure we could secure against the possibility of the fine, and do so in a way that was commercially benchmarked. We have done that and it can be scrutinised. The deadline was last night. The fact that I have come immediately to this House to make a statement and publish the accounting officer’s advice I hope illustrates the transparency with which we have proceeded.

On the contingency that this arrangement has had and whether a deal has been approved, I put it as a matter of fact that the reason we had to make this transaction was that we have not, as a House of Commons, agreed a Brexit deal. We have not ratified a Brexit agreement. I said to my opposite number that I welcome the constructive discussions that are taking place. I hope that in the days and weeks ahead, the hon. Gentleman’s party might approach them in the same spirit and try to come to an agreement so that not just the steel industry but every industry in the country can have confidence in the terms of our relationship with Europe in the years to come.

**Sir Oliver Letwin** (West Dorset) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State. My experience in government was that the most important things that Secretaries of State do are those least noticed. They are the crises that do not happen. He has, with supreme competence, dealt with what could have been an extraordinarily tricky situation, as all those involved in maintaining British Steel in this country know.

Is the Department taking steps to ensure that when we leave, as I hope, in an orderly way in the relatively near future with an agreement with the EU, there is a proper substitute for the ETS on a domestic basis that
will complement the measures that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is taking in a whole realm of cognate spheres?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for the endorsement of my right hon. Friend, not least because in the previous Government he played the role he has ascribed to me with some deftness and success on many different occasions. He is absolutely right that agreeing to a withdrawal agreement would allow our continued participation until at least December 2020, giving us the time to put in place different arrangements, which would be in our gift. One reason we felt that it was important that British Steel should comply is that the institutions that drive compliance with emissions reductions targets should be respected. We want to send a clear signal that we expect the targets to be respected and implemented. That will take place while we are a member of the European Union and, as my right hon. Friend indicates, afterwards too.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision. Without it, there would be huge job losses in the industry. This crisis at British Steel has been caused by the uncertainty over our future membership of the EU’s emissions trading scheme. Given that half of steel manufacturing in this country is exported to the EU, our relationship with the EU matters hugely for the future. Why did the Government allow us to get into the position where British Steel had to pay upfront for its allowances, even though we remain a member of the EU today? Will the Government confirm what the liability to the ETS will be of British Steel and other UK steel producers should we leave the EU without a deal?

Greg Clark: The position we find ourselves in is through no choice of the UK Government. It was the Commission that took the decision to suspend the availability of allowances. We are having constructive discussions with the Commission about the release of the allowances and that is why this arrangement is described accurately as a bridging arrangement. We want and expect to be able to have access to those allowances. Participation in the ETS is not a matter of entitlement. It is not available to countries outside the European Union without special designation, but the discussions we are having are constructive.

On liabilities and the nature of the transaction, I have written to the hon. Lady in her capacity as Chair of the Select Committee. I am very happy to follow that up and to give whatever evidence she needs to scrutinise the transaction.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the support for British Steel, but with the greatest respect, what is the Secretary of State doing to support other UK-based steel companies that have already paid to meet their commitments and could now find themselves at a commercial disadvantage as a result of the action he has taken? Has he taken account of that and will he be able to offer support to other UK-based steel companies?

Greg Clark: We of course make an assessment of the consequences. I think my hon. Friend will see, when he looks at the advice, that it seemed to be the right and responsible decision to ensure that this huge liability of over half a billion pounds did not suddenly crystallise in British Steel. We have a strong relationship with the steel sector. I might mention the industrial energy efficiency fund, worth £315 million. The steel sector is a prime example of how working to improve the efficiency of the technology deployed can help with our emissions reduction targets and reduce the costs of the sector. We are working with all companies in the sector to make that a reality. I know that, in his constituency capacity in south Wales, he takes a big interest in that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): No doubt carbon credits are a useful way of managing carbon emissions, but Brexit or not we need to become carbon-zero in a very short period of time. I wonder whether the Government are actually taking that urgency seriously. What are the Government doing continuing to support the fracking industry, which is a fossil fuel industry? Surely all we do needs to go into renewable energy?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady should know that we have one of the strongest records in the whole world in implementation and delivery of emissions reductions. It is important to acknowledge that mechanisms such as carbon pricing are one of the foundations of that, so it is important that the rules are respected. We are about to have a substantial debate on our next steps. I hope she will contribute to that, as am I. Perhaps we might have some further exchanges later this afternoon.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): As important as the continuation of the ETS post Brexit surely is, does my right hon. Friend share the view that the really long-term solution for both heavy industry and a zero-carbon economy is the advent of carbon capture and storage, and hydrogen? What measures are the Government taking to advance those causes?

Greg Clark: I agree with that. My hon. Friend gives me an opportunity to respond to what the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) referred to and I neglected to comment on. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is the opportunity for energy-intensive industries that are significant emitters to capture that carbon. We have a competition, which is being run at the moment, and sites such as Teesside have put in very impressive and attractive bids. I and my colleagues in Government want Britain not just to be one of the leading developers of the technology of CCUS, but to implement it to the advantage of our energy-intensive industries.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The term “cliff edge” is probably overused, but there is no doubt that British Steel was taken to the cliff edge on this one, with incredibly last-minute deals and negotiations. What steps will be taken to ensure that lessons are learned from this experience? Could the political declaration on the future relationship be amended to secure a commitment to the ETS? If not, we will end up at another cliff edge at the end of the transition period.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman talks about taking us to the cliff edge. It is a legal responsibility on the part of each emitter to comply with its requirements to surrender allowances. Notice was given, and as some of my hon. Friends pointed out, every other company
acted on that. We were presented late in the day with a choice I described as unenviable. We responded to that pragmatically, and I detect in the hon. Gentleman’s tone a recognition that this is the right step. To avoid repetition of this situation, the advice from the company and the industry is clear: the House needs to come together, long before 31 October, and agree a withdrawal agreement that would result automatically in the ability to release allowances, not only for this year but for the following year too.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I very much agree with the steps taken by my right hon. Friend. However, he is essentially saying that this whole situation has arisen because the United Kingdom, and specifically our steel industry, is being punished by the European Union, despite our still remaining a member?

Greg Clark: I would not put it that way myself. The suspension was put in place because we were liable to leave on 29 March. Given that the year to which the allowances refer is the calendar year from January to December, it was the observation that, as things stood, we were unlikely not to be a member of the scheme for the great majority of that year; now that we have agreed an extension of up to 31 October, that is clearly a different matter. The discussions we have had so far with the Commission have been constructive in recognising our ability to issue new allowances.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): To what degree does the Secretary of State agree with the assessment in the Financial Times on 16 April that this situation could have been avoided had the company not sold surplus allowances from previous years, and therefore that this situation is a result of management failure by the private equity firm that owns British Steel for which the public are now expected to pay?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman reflects an accurate position: if the allowances had not been sold, they would be available to discharge the liability. This is by no means a unique practice; across industries and firms, it is a fairly common way to proceed. However, it might well command the attention of the House as to whether it is the best way to proceed.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. It will be particularly welcomed by my many constituents who work at the Scunthorpe works, which, as he highlighted, supplies most of the rail network with track, which of course would have to be imported were the Scunthorpe works to close. Does he agree that this highlights that there is a cost to tackling climate change? It is far better that we approach that in a realistic, well-balanced way, such as the Government propose, rather than giving way to unrealistic demands from other groups.

Greg Clark: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s welcome. I know that his constituents would have faced a worrying time had this liability crystallised on the company. In fact, British Steel has free allowances to cover its emissions. It is not a question of this being, as it were, a punitive tax; because British Steel operates in an internationally competitive sector, it has allowances to cover the costs that it incurs. It is a question of matching up the timing of the new allowances with its obligations. In this case, we found a way to square that circle.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Today’s statement is about specific support for British Steel, and I completely understand the position we are in. However, as the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) said, other companies out there that have incurred significant costs will ask what support the Government might offer to them. What will the Minister say to them?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady will know that, through the industrial strategy and our work with particular sectors, we have a strong record of investing in the future potential of industries. Steel is part of that, but as she will know, we have increasingly deep working relationships—whether with the automotive, life sciences or the creative industries, or other sectors such as construction—to make sure that we capitalise on our strengths in this country, which are innovation and discovery, putting ourselves at the cutting edge. That is available and is being well exploited across the economy. I hope and expect that the steel industry will be part of that investment in the capability and capacity to prosper in the future.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and his support for British Steel. The steel industry, by its very nature, has very high energy costs. What action is my right hon. Friend or his Department taking to reduce those costs and, in parallel, to reduce pollution from the steel industry, which is very important for the future of the United Kingdom?

Greg Clark: I mentioned—it was announced in the spring financial statement—a new industrial energy efficiency fund worth a third of a billion pounds to partner with energy-intensive businesses in changing and upgrading their technology, so that they both consume less energy, and therefore have lower costs, and also produce lower emissions. As I said to the shadow Secretary of State, since 2013 we have provided nearly £300 million to energy-intensive industries in compensation for some of the effects of high costs. However, the way forward is energy efficiency, and that is the commitment that we made and backed in the financial statement.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this measure but, again, it is a reaction to potential failure, rather than a proper, coherent plan for the industry. That needs to be gripped robustly. Does the Minister accept that there is insufficient capacity within the European emissions trading scheme to provide free credits to companies subject to anti-competitive measures, dumping and distortions caused by firms trading outside the ETS? We need to increase the level playing field available to British Steel operating in that sphere, in which it is subject to distortions caused by firms outside the ETS.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to be vigorous in our trade defence mechanisms. Steel is a sector that all Members know is subject, and has been over the years, to dumping by global competitors. Through the G20 forum in particular, at which I have represented our country, we have been vigorous in
pressing for the strongest measures against anti-competitive practices such as that, and we will continue to do so in the future.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I apologise for not bobbing, Mr Speaker; my back is showing my age and its abuse on the rugby field over the years, so I waited until the very last moment.

I think the Secretary of State has handled this brilliantly well. There was a danger that we stepped in really early on, as suggested by Opposition Members. The market needs to sort this—companies have obligations—and only as a last resort should taxpayers’ money be brought into the equation.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right, and I do not want to say from the Dispatch Box that I have engaged again in this type of transaction. The obligations are with the company, and it would obviously have been much better had it been able to discharge them itself. However, sometimes we have to take decisions in office based on the evidence of the consequences. I felt, and was supported by advice that I received, that the responsible action in this case was to make this facility available, with the security that we have obtained, and to do so in time to allow the company to meet its obligations by the deadline.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): British Steel workers will be glad that the Government have stepped in here, but in Wales 9,000 jobs rely on this whole sector, and many workers and their families in south Wales will be troubled by the wider situation. Can the Secretary of State please confirm whether the new fleet solid support ships will be built with UK steel?

Greg Clark: The question of procurement is a very important one. We have changed the rules so that local economic, social and environmental impact can be taken into account in those procurement decisions, and we have also published for full disclosure for every Department and arm’s length body the details of what steel they procure.

Nick Smith: Yes or no?

Greg Clark: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we cannot specify under the procurement regulations that the work should go to a particular firm, but we can make it possible to take in local effects and be transparent as to the decisions taken. Within the legal constraints, which the industry and the unions well understand, we are acting to make sure that the process is much more public than it has ever been before.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Four Seasons Health Care provides residential care for 17,000 old and vulnerable people in 322 homes across the country and employs 22,000 staff. Some 80% of Four Seasons residents are in nursing or high-dependency beds, with only 20% of its places in residential care. Yesterday, it was announced that the Four Seasons Health Care group was going into administration. The care homes it runs are now up for sale, which leaves residents and their families facing considerable uncertainty, with no guarantees of what the future may hold.

Despite this collapse and the fragility of the care market, there is still no sign of the Government’s long-overdue Green Paper on adult social care funding, which the Secretary of State pledged to bring forward by April—not May, but April. In the last hour we have seen a written statement, but given the numbers of extremely vulnerable people affected by this situation, hon. Members should have the chance to question Ministers. Mr Speaker, have you been notified of an intention by the Government to make an oral statement to reassure hon. Members about the future care of their constituents who are resident in those Four Seasons care homes and nursing homes?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I have not been so notified. However, this is an extremely serious matter, which I myself of course have seen covered in the media in the last 24 hours. My advice to the hon. Lady is that she pursue the issue with her usual indefatigability. The fact that no ministerial oral statement has been proffered does not mean that the possibility of an oral exchange on the matter in the near future does not exist. There is a possibility of such an exchange, and she might wish to reflect on how she might achieve her objective.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that tomorrow in the local elections voters in Watford, Mid Sussex and North West Leicestershire will be required to take their poll cards to the polling station to cast their vote under the Government’s voter ID trial. You may also be aware that European poll cards have also dropped—before the local elections—in these three authorities. I have had an indication that the European poll cards will not be accepted tomorrow for voters who turn up in these three districts. Have you had any indication that a Minister will attend the House to clarify the situation for voters who perhaps mistakenly take the wrong poll card to the polling station tomorrow and are turned away and denied their right to vote?

Mr Speaker: I have received no indication that a Minister intends to come to the House to speak about the matter today, but it is very important that there be clarity about the voting arrangements, so I hope that the words uttered by the hon. Lady will have been heard on the Treasury Bench and that they will without delay be conveyed to Cabinet Office Ministers.
BILL PRESENTED

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES (NO. 2) BILL

Secretary Michael Gove, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mrs Andrea Leadsom and David Rutley, presented a Bill to make provision to prohibit the use of wild animals in travelling circuses.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Tuesday 7 May; and to be printed (Bill 385) with explanatory notes (Bill 385-EN).

Police Officer Training

(Autism Awareness)

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

1.35 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require police forces to train police officers in autism awareness; and for connected purposes.

There are at least 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. The vast majority are law-abiding citizens, but, from time to time, they may come into contact with police officers—either as witnesses, victims, or alleged offenders—and neither the interests of justice nor those of autistic people themselves are served when there is no real understanding by officers of their difficulties.

Daniel Smith is a 25-year-old autistic man who ran to a police station for refuge after being beaten up in what was essentially a hate crime that occurred while he was chatting to some strangers in a park. He expected to find safety, but instead he found himself handcuffed, locked up for many hours and given two assault charges, despite telling the police officers he was autistic. It was a terrifying and distressing ordeal, during which he was refused contact with either his family, an appropriate adult or a medic, which he should have been allowed. It took a further and anxious six months before his case came to court. Thankfully, he was acquitted of all charges, but he was badly let down and is now, not surprisingly, frightened of the police.

The National Autistic Society told me that a recent survey showed that just 37% of police officers said they had had any autism training, but that 92% said they would find it useful. While there are training duties for health and social care professionals and the Government have just consulted on a new mandatory training programme, the same is not true for our police forces.

An untrained police officer is unlikely to understand the problems that many autistic people face and will probably be unable to imagine what it might be like for someone such as Daniel Smith to be questioned, accused or arrested. They will probably be unable to grasp the autistic person’s difficulties with social communication, such as problems with interpreting words, gestures and tone of voice. Often autistic people will not understand facial expressions, gestures or tone of voice, and they may interpret words quite literally. They often might just agree with what is said to them and so wrongly admit guilt. Police officers will probably be unable to grasp their difficulties with social interaction. Autistic people find it difficult to read other people or recognise or understand their feelings and intentions. As they may also often find it difficult to express their own emotions, they find engagement with society seriously challenging. They may appear insensitive, behave in socially inappropriate ways and generally appear odd in the way they react; they might look guilty.

Police officers will probably be unable to understand difficulties that autistic people have with changes to daily rules and routines. Autistic people may find comfort in daily routines and rules that can be safely followed in a world they perceive as confusing and unpredictable. They may struggle with changes to their routines. Police officers might not understand other things, such as their
intensity or even obsessive interest in a particular subject or topic, which can become all-important to them and might sometimes put them in conflict with the law.

There are also all-important difficulties relating to sensory sensitivity. Autistic people are often over or under-sensitive to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. A busy, crowded room may become unbearable, for example, and unexpected noises can cause extreme anxiety or even physical pain. That can result in challenging behaviour or meltdown—an intense response when autistic people are overwhelmed, resulting in a temporary loss of control, which is very relevant to the conditions in a police station.

All those common characteristics of autistic people can combine to make them victims of crime, unwitting or unknowing offenders, or unreliable witnesses. Contact with the police will often come at a time of heightened anxiety, which is stressful for all of us but amounts to a crisis for someone on the autism spectrum.

It is now 10 years since the passing of the Autism Act 2009, which requires the autism strategy to exist. Although some progress has been made, many of our services still do not understand autism well enough, and that includes the police service. Some police forces have acknowledged this need, and some training takes place in some forces, but much more needs to be done. We believe that mandatory training would have many benefits for autistic people, for their families, and for police officers themselves.

If that happens, autistic people who are victims of crime, or witnesses, will be better understood and helped to explain what has happened to them and assist police with their inquiries. If they are suspected of committing a crime, they can be questioned in a way that enables them to understand what is happening and will not cause them more anxiety. If they are being arrested, a police officer may be able to better prepare them, and avoid dangerous and traumatic physical restraint. Reasonable adjustments such as the provision of a single cell, perhaps in a quieter part of the custody suite, could be arranged at the police station to help to prevent an autistic person from becoming overwhelmed by the sensory environment.

The police will feel more confident in their abilities to support autistic people in their communities. After all, there is one autistic person among every 100 people. Autistic people will be more confident that they and their needs will be understood, and that may make them more willing to come forward to assist police or report crimes.

Perhaps most important of all, inappropriate prosecutions leading to incarceration might be avoided if autism were better understood and recognised in the custody suite. Being arrested can be a sign of an autistic person in crisis—an autistic person whose needs are not being met. We already have far too many autistic people in prison. Some of them have not yet been diagnosed, and they will be diagnosed in very few of our prisons. How much better it would be if more such cases were dealt with through police referral to the liaison and diversion schemes that are now being developed to help offenders to understand their offences and not to repeat the offending behaviour. That would be far better than a prison sentence in some, if not all, cases.

The Bill will oblige the Government to create an autism understanding standard for police officers, outlining what good autism training looks like and what is expected of officers. On that basis, it will require the national policing curriculum in England and Wales, which currently requires training to protect vulnerable people—including people with mental health problems—to include autism, which will ensure that new police officers have the training that they need. It will require each police force to create an autism understanding continuing professional development programme, based on that standard. Establishing that will have a cost, and there will also be the cost of releasing officers to attend training, so the Government should establish a funding scheme.

As the Autism Act approaches its 10-year review, it is high time that the police service was required to make autism awareness training mandatory.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Ann Clwyd, Tonia Antoniazzi, Kevin Brennan, Dr David Drew, Dame Cheryl Gillan, Susan Elan Jones, Jeremy Lefroy, Ian Murray, Sir Mike Penning, Jim Shannon, Nick Smith and Tom Tugendhat present the Bill.

Ann Clwyd accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 386).*
Opposition Day

[19TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Environment and Climate Change

Mr Speaker: I must inform the House that I have not selected either of the amendments.

1.47 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House declares an environment and climate emergency following the finding of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change that to avoid a more than 1.5°C rise in global warming, global emissions would need to fall by around 45 per cent from 2010 levels by 2050, recognising the devastating impact that volatile and extreme weather will have on UK food production, water availability, public health and through flooding and wildfire damage; notes that the UK is currently missing almost all of its biodiversity targets, with an alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50 per cent to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling that alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50 per cent to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling the alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50 per cent to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling the alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50 per cent to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House declares an environment and climate emergency following the finding of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change that to avoid a more than 1.5°C rise in global warming, global emissions would need to fall by around 45 per cent from 2010 levels by 2050, recognising the devastating impact that volatile and extreme weather will have on UK food production, water availability, public health and through flooding and wildfire damage; notes that the UK is currently missing almost all of its biodiversity targets, with an alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50 per cent to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling those problems; calls on the Government to increase the ambition of the UK’s climate change targets under the Climate Change Act 2008 to achieve net zero emissions before 2050, to increase support for and set ambitious, short-term targets for the roll-out of renewable and low carbon energy and transport, and to move swiftly to capture economic opportunities and green jobs in the low carbon economy while managing risks for workers and communities currently reliant on carbon intensive sectors; and further calls on the Government to lay before the House within the next six months urgent proposals to restore the UK’s natural environment and to deliver a circular, zero waste economy.

Today the House must declare an environment and climate emergency. We have no time to waste. We are living in a climate crisis that will spiral dangerously out of control unless we take rapid and dramatic action now. This is no longer about a distant future; we are talking about nothing less than the irreversible destruction of the environment within the lifetimes of Members.

Young people know this. They have the most to lose. A few weeks ago, like many other Members on both sides of the House, I was deeply moved to see the streets outside Parliament filled with colour and the noise of children chanting “Our planet, our future”. For someone of my generation, it was inspiring but also humbling to see the streets outside Parliament filled with colour and the noise of children chanting “Our planet, our future”. For someone of my generation, it was inspiring but also humbling to see the streets outside Parliament filled with colour and the noise of children chanting “Our planet, our future”. For someone of my generation, it was inspiring but also humbling to see the streets outside Parliament filled with colour and the noise of children chanting “Our planet, our future”. For someone of my generation, it was inspiring but also humbling

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend’s constituency neighbour, I congratulate him on, many years ago, giving up his vehicle and on using mainly his bicycle for years as an MP. [Interruption.] I gently ask the right hon. Gentleman to face the House so we can all hear him.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for that congratulation. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who represents an absolutely wonderful town where environment is at the core of the lives of many people. We are not here to debate the EU or Brexit, about which everyone will be very pleased, but I would say that, under any proposal from my party, we would import into the UK all the environmental regulations the EU has adopted, most of which are very good and progressive, although often they do not go far enough, and there would be a dynamic—

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently ask the right hon. Gentleman to face the House so we can all hear him.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you are absolutely the last person I would want to be offensive to, so I apologise. We would ensure that there is a dynamic relationship with those regulations, so I am trying to please both sides at the present time—[Interruption.] Such is the joy of politics when we want to protect our environment.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): How the right hon. Gentleman is proceeding with his Brexit policy is interesting and will be noted outside this place. Does he agree that to beat climate change in this country and around the world we have to green our pension funds, banks and stock exchanges, decarbonise capitalism and drive trillions of dollars into the green clean energy investments that we need?

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. In a former life, I was a trade union organiser and negotiator. Even then we were discussing with the pension fund trustees how they would have environmentally sustainable investments and we would use that as a way of promoting green energy and such issues. I urge people, many millions of whom have shares in pension funds, to do exactly that.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I welcome that Labour is now following the Green party lead in calling for a climate emergency, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that fossil fuel subsidies make a mockery of a climate emergency? We are one of the worst countries in Europe for giving subsidies to fossil fuel...
industry. Does he agree that it is not compatible with a climate-constrained economy to go on with these subsidies to fossil fuel companies?

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed, what we need is a sustainable energy policy and I will come on to that. I obviously pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work she has done on these issues of environmental sustainability.

Jeremy Corbyn: I will give way a couple more times but then I ought to get on with my speech, or else the Speaker will tell me off because others want to speak.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): On that point about fossil fuels, does the right hon. Gentleman recognise what natural gas has done to decarbonise this country, reducing our levels to levels not seen since 1888? Does he also recognise that 280,000 jobs are supported by the oil and gas industry? Is he concerned about those 280,000 jobs?

Jeremy Corbyn: We want a sustainable energy policy in this country. I did not hear all of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention as others were talking, but if he is talking about issues of fracking he knows perfectly well that this party is opposed to it because we want to see a more sustainable world and a sustainable environment.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about the lack of urgency in the Government’s own targets, which they acknowledge they need to meet? For example, by the time we meet the reducing plastic waste target, I will be 66. Why should it take a quarter of a century to achieve that change?

Jeremy Corbyn: The whole point of today’s debate is to declare an emergency to focus the attention of all of us on the sheer urgency of the issue because it is not going to go away; it is going to get considerably worse unless we act and set an example to other nations to also act.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I give way to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Mary Creagh: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on declaring an environment and climate emergency. Did he see the report the Committee produced last week stating that, if we leave the EU, the watchdog the Government are currently proposing is toothless because it does not have the power to fine Government for breaches of air pollution, water quality and waste standards? Does he agree that that is a very big barrier for the Government to overcome?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, the work her Committee does and the report it produced. The watchdog has to have all the teeth necessary to make sure the actions are taken. As I pointed out in response to an earlier intervention, there has to be a dynamic relationship with European regulations in order to achieve that. I thank her for her work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am going to make some progress before giving way to some more colleagues.

I have been a Member of this House for 36 years. In that time I have observed something about this place that is glaringly obvious but seldom acknowledged: Parliament rarely leads change; it usually drags its feet—it is normally the last place to pick up on the major reforms that society is demanding. Think about the huge transformations in our society—workers’ rights, women’s rights and gay rights. The impetus has always come from outside—from social movements and communities—while Westminster is often the last place to understand that.

Let us not repeat that pattern. Let us respond to what a young generation is saying to us in raising the alarm. By becoming the first Parliament in the world to declare a climate emergency, we could, and I hope we do, set off a wave of actions from Parliaments and Governments all around the world. Surely if we lead by example and others follow, that would be the best possible answer to the all too common excuse we all hear on doorsteps: “Why should we act when others won’t?”

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This side of the Chamber was absolutely packed when my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) introduced the Bill to hardwire net zero into our economy. Where were the Opposition then?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not entirely sure what point the hon. Lady is trying to make, but I am pleased she is here today and I look forward to hearing her contribution.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Public sentiment and Labour’s position is clear: we must declare a climate emergency and legislate for net zero emissions. But the Government are procrastinating. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the political will to tackle climate change is there in the public and on these Opposition Benches but it is absolutely lacking on the Government Benches?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Let us show today that the political will is here, in this Parliament, to declare the climate emergency, which we believe is necessary.

Let us work more closely with countries that are serious about ending the climate catastrophe, especially those at the sharp end of it, such as the small country of the Maldives, so vulnerable to rising sea levels. It told the UN climate talks last year: “We are not prepared to die” and implored countries to unite. Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister recently warned of the “existential threat” posed by climate breakdown to the 160 million people of his country and urged others to adhere to their commitments under the Paris climate change agreement.

I attended the Paris conference in 2015 with my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). I thank him for his passion at that
conference, for his commitment to environmental sustainability and for the great work he did on forestry during the last Labour Government. It is a pleasure to work with him. He and the whole of the Labour party strongly support the UK’s bid to host the UN climate change conference in 2020, and I really hope that that will happen. When it does, Members from across the House will have a chance to interact with those attending the conference.

Let us also make it clear to President Trump that he must re-engage with international climate agreements. We must also be absolutely clear-eyed about the Paris agreement: it is a huge and significant breakthrough, but it is not enough. If every country in the whole world meets its current pledges as per the Paris agreement, temperatures will still rise by 3° in this century. At that point, southern Europe, the horn of Africa, central America and the Caribbean will be in permanent drought. Major cities such as Miami and Rio de Janeiro would be lost to rising sea levels. At 4°, which is where we are all heading with the current rate of emissions, agricultural systems would be collapsing.

This is not just a climate change issue; it is a climate emergency. We are already experiencing the effects all around us. Here at home, our weather is becoming more extreme. The chief executive of the Environment Agency recently warned that we were looking into what he called the “jaws of death” and that we could run short of water within 25 years. At the same time, flash flooding is becoming more frequent. Anyone who has visited the scene of a flooded town or village knows the devastation that it brings to families. That was vividly brought home to me when I visited Cockermouth after the 2015 floods, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), who is doing such a brilliant job as shadow Environment Secretary. She first challenged the Government to declare a climate emergency a month ago.

Around the world, we are seeing ice caps melting, coral reefs dissolving, droughts in Africa, hurricanes in the Americas and wildfires in Australia. Cyclone Idai killed more than 900 people in south-east Africa, mainly in Mozambique, and affected 3 million more, only to be immediately followed by the current horrors of Cyclone Kenneth. The heating up of our climate is contributing to a terrifying loss of animal and plant species, but sadly, that is something that we are only just recognising.

I remember joining and working with the World Wide Fund for Nature when I was at school. According to the WWF, humanity has wiped out 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles since 1970—a year that many of us in this House can remember.

Earlier this year, the first global scientific review of its kind found that insects could become extinct within a century unless action was taken. Insects pollinate plants and keep the soil healthy. Without pollination and healthy soil there is no food, and without food there is no life. Meanwhile, there is far too much intensive farming. We are pumping far too many fertilisers into the earth, which is taking its toll on our soil. Soil degradation is a major issue, as anyone who reads the farming journals will be picking up on all the time. We are seeing the weakening of soil structures, and there is a need to strengthen them. More sustainable farming systems will lead in the longer run to better yields and less cost for pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers. The Environment Secretary himself has warned that we have only 30 to 40 years left before our fertile soil is eradicated, so I hope he will support the motion today.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I agree with what the Leader of the Opposition said about President Trump. It is time that he re-engaged with the Paris agenda, and dare I say that that would be a good subject for after-dinner conversation? The right hon. Gentleman mentioned leading by example, and he is right that this country must do that even though we play only a small part in the overall global emissions. Should he become Prime Minister, where does he think coal should sit in the balanced energy policy of the future?

Jeremy Corbyn: We need to see a growth in renewable sources and green energy, and I am coming on to that in my speech. We also need to see a reduction in the use of fossil fuels.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way; I recognise that he has allowed a lot of interventions. We can all agree that there is an environmental and climate change emergency, and he is setting out some of the reasons that many of us—most of us, all of us—would agree with the motion, but is it not time for the House to stop scoring cheap political points and to start trying to find consensus? I ask him in all genuineness: if he is willing to sit down with others to try to find consensus on Brexit, is he willing to sit down with others to try to find consensus on something that is arguably far more profound—climate change?

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, the leaders of the parties in Parliament, with the exception of the Prime Minister, attended a roundtable with a group of young people led by Greta Thunberg to discuss that very issue. Yes, I am very happy to sit down with anybody to discuss the issues of our environment and sustainability, and I invite the right hon. Lady to do exactly the same.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): On the subject of coal, does the right hon. Gentleman now regret the comments he made while he was seeking to become leader of his party in 2015, when he stated that he was in favour of reopening coalmines, and does he therefore deplore the recent decision to open a new coalmine in Cumbria?

Jeremy Corbyn: I do not regret any of the statements I made in the 2015 leadership campaign. I was talking then about the way in which the coalmining communities in south Wales had been so disgracefully treated by the Government that the right hon. Gentleman supports. On the question of the Cumbrian mine, yes there is an issue there, and there is also an issue about the supply of coal that will always be necessary for fuelling the blast furnaces in the steel industry. This is why I am talking about taking a balanced approach to energy that recognises the need for sustainable industry and for reducing emissions. None of this is easy, but we have to move in the right direction by reducing carbon dioxide emissions and creating a cleaner, more sustainable environment.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I agree with my right hon. Friend on the ecological crisis that we are facing. I am hosting Chris Packham here in Parliament today, where he will meet parliamentarians.
right hon. Friend join him and members of the Environmental Audit Committee in calling for a conservation audit to look at what is really going on out there with species biodiversity?

Jeremy Corbyn: I compliment my hon. Friend on her work. An audit like that would be an appropriate response to the debate we are having today. She is right to suggest that unless we examine biodiversity loss, particularly in areas of monocultural agriculture around the country, as well as in urban areas, we will not know just how serious the situation is, so I do support her proposal.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the most disturbing aspects of this climate emergency is that some of the poorest people in the world live on the land that is closest to the rising sea levels? Anyone who is concerned about mass migration today should be truly worried about this crisis, because millions of those people are going to be travelling many miles to try to find a safe place with clean drinking water where they can make a home for themselves.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I shall come on to it in a moment. At the heart of the environment and climate emergency is the issue of justice, and it is those here and around the world who are least to blame for it who bear the burden and pay the highest cost. A 2015 study found that children living in our British inner-city areas can have their lung capacity reduced by up to 10% by air pollution on major roads. Of course, the situation is even more extreme for children growing up in densely populated urban areas in China and India. The pollution levels in many cities around the world are damaging children before they reach the age of five. Children should not have to pay with their health for our failure to clean up our toxic air.

Working-class communities suffer the worst effects of air pollution. Those who are least able to rebuild their lives after flooding will be hit hardest by rising food prices, while the better off, who are sometimes more responsible for emissions, can pay their way out of the trouble. Internationally, in a cruel twist of fate, it is the global south that faces the greatest devastation at the hands of drought and extreme weather, which fuel poverty and war and create refugees as people are forced to flee their homes. Some of the 65 million refugees in this world—not all, but some—are in reality climate refugees. They are paying the price of emissions that come not from the global south, but overwhelmingly from the global north and rapidly industrialising societies.

Sir David Attenborough recently said on his brilliant television programme:

“We now stand at a unique point in our planet’s history. One where we must all share responsibility both for our present wellbeing and for the future of life on Earth.”

That is the magnitude of what we are talking about. It is too late for tokenistic policies or gimmicks. We have to do more. Banning plastic is good and important, but individual action is not enough. We need a collective response that empowers people, instead of shaming them if they do not buy expensive recycled toilet paper or drive the newest Toyota Prius. If we are to declare an emergency, it follows that radical and urgent action must be taken. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, to avoid the disastrous effects of warming greater than 1.5°C, global emissions must fall by about 45% by 2030 to reach net zero by 2050 at the absolute latest. It is a massive demand and it is a massive ask, and it will not happen by itself.

We are going to have to free ourselves from some of the harmful beliefs that have characterised our thinking for too long. The hidden hand of the market will not save us, and technological solutions will not magically appear out of nowhere. An emergency of this magnitude requires large-scale Government intervention to kick-start industries, to direct investment and to boost research and development in the green technologies of the future, and that is not a burden.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on leading on this debate. Does he agree that the last Labour Government created a consensus on this issue under the Climate Change Act 2008, which was so ably led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), and that that consensus included the need to work together not just in this country, but with our international partners? Will he join me in congratulating the Welsh Labour Government on declaring a climate emergency earlier this week?

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I will come on to the work done by the previous Labour Government, which did so much to try and bring about awareness of the climate emergency. We have the chance to bring new manufacturing and engineering jobs to places that have never recovered from the destruction of our industries in the early 1980s. We need a green industrial revolution with huge investments in new technologies and green industries.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is correct to declare a climate emergency and a broader environment emergency. He talks about radical action, and one action that we need to take is to protect the world’s forests. After transport, deforestation is the second biggest source of emissions. We are destroying around 20 million acres—a mind-boggling amount—every single year, and billions of people depend directly on forests for their livelihoods. So, from the point of view of biodiversity, humanitarianism and climate change, protecting the forests must surely be a No. 1 priority for any Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Gentleman is right that that must be a high priority. I will be coming on to it towards the end of my speech, but he is correct that forests not only sustain a high level of biodiversity, but are a huge source of carbon capture, locking it up within the trees themselves.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the need to address climate change. Does he agree that if the Government were really committed to tackling climate change, they would not be investing in fracking? Instead, they would be investing in renewable energy sources, such as tidal energy and solar, that would help areas such as mine in the north-east.
Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed. My hon. Friend knows my views on that. I attended a public meeting in a village in Derbyshire to discuss fracking, and I was impressed by the fact that all the people there were determined to improve their environment and wanted a form of energy generation that is more sustainable than fracking. They were worried about the dangers of pollution levels in groundwater and other issues, so I thank her for that intervention.

Historically, the industry that changed Britain was coal. Coal powered the first industrial revolution in Britain, but that was done on the backs of the working class at the expense of our environment. The green industrial revolution will unwind those injustices, harness manufacturing to avert climate breakdown, and provide well-paid, good-skilled and secure jobs. Imagine former coalfield areas becoming the new centres of development of battery and energy storage. Towns such as Swindon, which proudly made locomotives, could become hubs for building a next generation of high-speed trains. Shipbuilding areas that were once the heart of an industry that is now diversified around the world could gain a new impetus in developing offshore wind turbines and the technology that goes with them.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for her great work on the green industrial revolution and Labour’s plan, which will create hundreds of thousands of jobs in renewable energy. The solution to the crisis is to reprogram our economy so it that works in the interests of people and the planet. That means publicly owned energy and water companies with a mandate to protect the environment instead of just seeking profit. It means redesigning public agricultural funding to benefit local business and sustainable farming that supports biodiversity, plant life and wildlife. It also means not unnecessarily flying basic products across the globe when they could be transported in a more sustainable way.

The solution means funding home insulation schemes, particularly where there are poor-quality homes—especially in the private rented sector—and I pay tribute to the work done on retrofitting homes. When I visited the University of Salford with my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South, I saw the work being done on the efficient conversion of back-to-back terraced houses into sustainable homes with energy efficiency. That means investing in bus routes, cycle routes and infrastructure, and reopening railway lines and improving railways in public ownership, so that people can travel quickly and cheaply, and not necessarily by car.

The solution also means big investments, such as the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, and not prioritising fracking, which rides roughshod over local communities and damages our climate. It means planting trees to improve air quality and prevent flooding. It means expanding our beautiful forests, which absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and provide habitats for wildlife. Sadly, the United Kingdom has some of the lowest levels of forest cover in Europe. It has expanded somewhat, but it needs to grow a lot faster. We must support tree planting initiatives, such as those in Leicester and Milton Keynes, and the brilliant initiative of the national forest in Leicestershire. It is exciting to think about all the opportunities we will have, if we take them. However, if Natural England’s funding is slashed in half, we will see how austerity and cutting of funds reduce our ability to act.

Internationally, we must ensure that our defence and diplomatic capacity are capable of responding quickly and effectively to climate disasters around the world. We must take serious steps on debt relief and cancellation to deal with the injustice of countries trying to recover from climate crises they did not create while, at the same time, struggling to pay massive international debts. The debt burden makes it even harder for them to deal with the crisis they are facing. In our aid policy, we need to end support for fossil fuel projects in the global south.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful point about the importance of justice. On Monday, I went to meet year 4 at the Milford Academy in my constituency because they had written on their concerns about deforestation in the Amazon rain forest. Is it not vital that we listen to the views of young people? They are the ones who will be hardest hit if we fail to act, and are they not right to call on us here today to commit to action to protect their future?

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The message is that we need to do far more in this country, but we also need to carry that message elsewhere. I cannot be the only person in this House who is very disappointed by the statements made by President Bolsonaro of Brazil concerning the future of the Amazon rain forest. It is a precious asset for the people of Brazil, as well as something necessary for the whole world. We will be in danger of forcing into extinction species that we have never even discovered, and that is exactly what is happening at the present time. It means that a creative thought process is needed in our international relations.

The last Labour Government brought in some of the most ambitious legislation in the world with the Climate Change Act 2008, and I pay a special thank you and tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and others who brought it in. They did incredible work to ensure it happened, and I remember my right hon. Friend’s work at the Copenhagen conference in 2009 when the UK was given a prime seat in the negotiations because we had genuine respect on this issue due to the Climate Change Act he had piloted through Parliament.

Since then, I am sorry to say, we have fallen behind. Conservative Members will boast that the UK is reducing carbon emissions, but I have to tell them it is too slow. At the current rate, we will not reach zero emissions until the end of the century, more than 50 years too late. By that time, our grandchildren will be fighting for survival on a dying planet.

The point that Greta Thunberg made to me and others when we met her last week is that we should listen to the science, which is an impressive thing for her to say on behalf of all the young people she works with and speaks for. The IPCC has said:

“Limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society”.

The IPCC has also said that such action is urgent.

The science says this is an emergency, but an emergency does not have to be a catastrophe. We could use it as an opportunity to rebuild our economy so that it works for the many, not the few. This is not a time to allow despair to take over, but a time for action. We can do this.
The Government can improve the lives of our people while defending our natural world. What we do in this country can have an impact around the globe.

Let us embrace hope. The children in schools get it. They get it right away. They grasp the threat to their own futures and, in fact, they want to be taught more about it as part of the curriculum and their normal school day. Are we to be content to hand down a broken planet to our children? That is the question we must ask ourselves today. We have a chance to act before it is too late, and it is a chance that will not be available to succeeding generations. It is our historic duty to take it.

I urge Members to support the motion before the House today.

2.24 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I begin by thanking the Leader of the Opposition for choosing today's motion, which provides us all with an opportunity to affirm our commitment to do more to deal with the challenge of climate change and to enhance our degraded environment.

I also begin by sending a message to the Minister for Energy and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), who, because of unfortunate family circumstances and a close family member's illness, cannot be here today. I am sure we all want to send her and her family our very best wishes. The Prime Minister cannot be here for this debate, as she very much wanted to be, because she is appearing before the Liaison Committee.

It is important to acknowledge that, across this House and outside it, there are many political figures and political leaders who have played a part in raising awareness of the challenge of climate change and in making it clear that we must do more. I am very happy to associate myself with the Leader of the Opposition's remarks in thanking the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). We served together in the coalition Government, in which he was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. Although we did not always agree on everything, I put on record my admiration for the way in which he approached all these issues in a balanced, mature and reformist fashion.

Although it is rare that I have good words to say in this House about the Scottish Government overall, I have to say that Roseanna Cunningham, the Scottish Environment Minister, has shown leadership on this issue. Although we may have our differences, it is only fair to record that Roseanna's voice has been a strong and powerful one for the environment, as indeed has that of Lesley Griffiths in the Welsh Assembly.

The environment belongs to us all, and the cause of climate change is a fight that unites us. All of us in this House have a common humanity that we need to defend.

Sir Edward Davey: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words. From my experience in government of two and a half years of negotiating on climate change with the European Union, Britain managed to ensure that 27 other countries raised their ambitions to our level. We managed to have leadership at the EU: we influenced America and China; and we influenced the Paris climate change treaty to make it far more ambitious than anyone expected at the time because we were at the European Union table and were able to lead on climate change. Does he realise that, by leaving that table, our influence on this critical issue for our world is being dramatically reduced?

Michael Gove: I repeat my gratitude to the right hon. Gentleman for all the work he did. There are a number of multilateral institutions through which we work, and this Government are committed—I am grateful for the Opposition's support—to bringing the conference of parties on climate change to London in 2020, to ensure that this country can build on the achievements that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) helped to secure at Paris and so we ensure that Britain can show global leadership on the environment and climate change.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that he and I were on different sides in the referendum, but does he agree that it was deeply frustrating, as Environment Ministers, to have to sit in EU co-ordination meetings lowering the standards and ambitions of the United Kingdom Government to reach a single point of agreement? It is not a binary issue. Britain has a very ambitious international commitment, and I found myself constantly having to lower those ambitions to maintain one point of agreement.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend knows how important it is to negotiate hard in every international forum, but he also knows, as a former Minister who is committed to the environment and who supported remaining in the European Union, that there are committed environmentalists who are strongly in favour of our membership of the European Union and committed environmentalists who welcome our departure. Nobody could say that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) or Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb are, in any way, anything other than sincere campaigners for environmental enhancement, and they both feel—I think this is completely open to debate—that we can achieve those goals as effectively, if not better, outside the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I want to make a little progress. I will take more interventions.

I welcome the opportunity of this debate, and I welcome the support provided by Members on both sides of the House. I make it clear that the Government recognise the situation we face is an emergency. It is a crisis, and it is a threat that we must all unite to meet. The first British politician—in fact, the first world politician—to make it clear that climate change was an emergency was Margaret Thatcher. She was a Conservative and a Christian who believed in the principle of stewardship, but above all she was a scientist who followed the evidence. From Margaret Thatcher at the United Nations.
to Michael Howard at Rio and the achievements of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye at Paris, there has been a green thread of ambition running through Conservative Governments. That is why in assessing what needs to be done, it is important that we take proper account of what has been done. We must acknowledge our mistakes, but we must also recognise achievements across parties.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: With that, I am happy to give way to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. His words are honeyed, as ever, but we need action, not just words. Last week, Greta Thunberg talked about the emergency and said that we needed action. Will the Secretary of State demonstrate his new-found conversion to this emergency by agreeing that the expansion of Heathrow airport is quite simply incompatible with our climate change commitments? If that goes ahead, aviation could, if it is given a blank cheque, be using up two fifths of our total carbon budget by 2050.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point. She talks about honeyed words, and of course one thing that the Government have done is to take action under our pollinator strategy to ensure that honey is produced in a more sustainable fashion. I am very happy to see more bees and other pollinators taking flight.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I want to make a little bit more progress. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for the speech that he gave yesterday, as was mentioned earlier in the debate.

Caroline Lucas: Answer the question, Mr Gove.

Michael Gove: I am. My hon. Friend laid out what the consequences will be if we do not collectively take action. To be fair to the Leader of the Opposition, so did he.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I will not give way at this stage; I will do so shortly. [Interruption.] No. I mean no disrespect, but I must make progress. I cannot answer the previous question—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The Secretary of State is trying to make progress.

Michael Gove: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will give way to colleagues from all parts of the House in a moment, but I must develop my argument. It is important that everything that the Government have done and need to do is properly analysed in this House.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham pointed out, five of the warmest years that this planet has ever endured have happened since 2010. The consequences for us all are visible, and they have been recorded by Members from across the House. We have wildfires in the Arctic, the Ross ice shelf is reducing in size at a greater rate than anyone anticipated and glaciers are in retreat across Europe and in the Tibetan plateau. Those things are all evidence of the impact of climate change. Although statistics are sometimes abstract and the impact may seem distant, as individual citizens and as parents we all know that the next generation will face the consequences if we do not take action now to deal with climate change.

A warming world will result in the desertification of large parts of our Earth; our Foreign Secretary is speaking today in the Sahel about the action that we are taking to deal with that. As has been mentioned, the transformation of previously fertile lands into lands that are incapable of generating food will result in population movement, which will create challenges—as the Leader of the Opposition has pointed out, not just a security challenge for the global north, but a moral and ethical challenge for us all.

We in the United Kingdom must bear that moral and ethical challenge particularly heavily. We were the first country to industrialise, and the industrial revolution that was forged here and generated prosperity here was responsible for the carbon emissions that have driven global warming. The burden of that is borne, even now, by those in the global south, so we have a responsibility to show leadership. It is vital that we reduce our emissions, for the defence and protection of those in small island developing states who face the prospect of coastal erosion and damage to their economies. That is why the Government are committed to spending £5 billion every year on helping developing nations to deal with the prospect of climate change.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I am now happy to give way, and I will do so first to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker).

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and his ministerial team for their leadership on chalk streams. This country has 85% of the world’s chalk streams, many of which are in my constituency and are degraded. The Secretary of State recognises that, so may I urge him to bring forward the Abingdon reservoir plan as soon as possible?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Biodiversity is declining precipitately not just in chalk streams, but in Scotland’s salmon rivers, and we need to take action. We need to work with water companies, landowners and farmers to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to restore our rivers to health, for the sake not only of recreational anglers but of all who believe in biodiversity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: In fairness, I must give way to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who has been seeking to intervene from the start.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I am grateful to the Secretary of State. Ten years ago, I helped to form Cool Earth, which is brilliantly run by Matthew Owen. We are a tiny non-governmental organisation that protects...
more rainforests than any other NGO, whatever its size. When we go to the Department for International Development, we are told that we cannot have any money because we ask for too little. Will the Secretary of State put a rocket up DFID?

Michael Gove: A rocket might require too much fossil fuel to have the desired effect. The right hon. Gentleman makes a serious point, however. We work collectively across the Government. On the morning of 7 May, I will be meeting the Secretaries of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and for International Development and the Foreign Secretary to raise that issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I want to be fair to Scottish National party colleagues, so I am happy to give way to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeill).

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. He is slowly signing up to the talk of a climate emergency. In my constituency, the UK’s carbon footprint could be given major help by the inclusion of a 600 MW interconnector from the mainland to the best wind resource in Europe. At the moment, Ofgem is talking about a 450 MW interconnector, but for 4p more for the average bill payer, we could do a lot for the UK’s carbon footprint. Will he stamp on Ofgem and make sure that, when it talks about consumer concerns, it is talking about consumers’ environment rather than a tawdry 4p on bills?

Michael Gove: That is a fair point, effectively made. As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is ultimately a decision for National Grid—[Interruption]—and Ofgem; forgive me. We should all take account of the fact that Scotland has contributed to the significant growth in renewables across the United Kingdom. Offshore wind and solar have grown over the past seven years. Yes, that has been led by a Conservative Government—or a coalition Government, for some of the time—in London, but the Scottish Government have played their part.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: In that spirit, I am very happy to give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald).

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene. I want to take him back to security. There are many teeth in the dangerous maw that is climate change, and security does not get enough attention. Between DFID, the Ministry of Defence and perhaps the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, will the Government at some point publish an analysis of how the global security effects of climate change affect the UK, and what part the UK sees itself playing?

Michael Gove: That is a fair point, and I will take it forward. In advance of our preparations for COP 26 at the end of 2020, I will ensure that we include in our deliberations the dimension of security, which I know is close to the hon. Gentleman’s heart.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I must allow my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park to intervene, after which I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and then make some progress.

Zac Goldsmith: Does my right hon. Friend agree that part of any new deal for nature—it has been much discussed, and I hope it will be discussed again today—should be a significant shift in DFID’s spending such that a much greater proportion of its money is spent on protecting and restoring the natural world, as a means of preventing base poverty and alleviating poverty?

Michael Gove: I could not agree more, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development believes that as well. One of the best ways to safeguard the environment is to support people towards sustainable growth. Projects such as the Darwin initiative have shown the way in making sure that we can provide people with dignity and the chance to flourish economically, while at the same time safeguarding and enhancing valuable habitats.

Anna McMorrin: The Secretary of State speaks with his characteristically warm words, but words are not followed by action across the Government. Subsidies are being cut from onshore wind and solar, while VAT on solar has been increased. We need to see real action across every single Department and a responsibility on every single Minister to cut carbon.

Michael Gove: I absolutely agree that we need action. I thank the hon. Lady for her work, because before she joined us in the House, she played a distinguished role in Welsh politics, making sure that the environment was at the heart of the agenda for the Welsh Assembly Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I have taken some interventions and I will take some more, but first I want to make some points, particularly in response to the hon. Lady’s question. She asked about action, and that is legitimate. Let me be clear: in the UK, since 2010, we have decarbonised our economy faster than any other G20 nation; between 2010 and 2018, we reduced greenhouse gas emissions in this country by 25%; UK CO₂ emissions have fallen for six years in a row, which is the longest period on record; and the UK’s renewable energy capacity has quadrupled since 2010. The proportion of UK electricity that comes from low-carbon sources increased from 19% in 2010 to almost 53% in 2018, which meant that 2018 was a record year for renewable energy; over the past year, we have generated record levels of solar and offshore wind energy; and annual support from the Government for renewables will be more than £10 billion by 2021. All that has come as a direct result of a shared ambition, with a Government who set stretching targets and are prepared to intervene where necessary, but who recognise that we need the ingenuity and enterprise of the private sector working in partnership with the Government to deliver change.

I stress that safeguarding our environment must not come at the cost of ending economic growth, because economic growth is vital to spur the innovation and
secure the investment to make sure that we have the technological breakthroughs that can safeguard our environment. Since 1990, under Governments of different parties, we have seen a 40% overall reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, and we have also seen a two-thirds increase in growth. If we think in particular about the significant growth in renewables, of course solar energy initially needed subsidy to kick-start it, but as solar energy costs have diminished, so the need for subsidy is, as any economist would tell the House, lesser. This is no criticism of any previous Government, but when we came into power, only 38.3 MW of power in this country was generated by solar; now, the amount is 13,000 MW, which is 13 GW. That is a 99% increase in solar power generation under Conservative Ministers.

Now, is there more to do? I do not deny that there is more to do. Should we be more ambitious? We have to be more ambitious. The story is sometimes told of the past nine years as nine years in which we allowed the grass to grow under our feet; no, we allowed a thousand flowers to flourish to ensure that our environment was safeguarded.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am sorry to make a Thatcherite point—I know Thatcherism does not go down very well nowadays—but will my right hon. Friend confirm that the best way to reduce emissions is to have a vigorous, free-enterprise, low-tax, deregulated economy, and that the countries with the worst records are socialist command economies, particularly in eastern Europe?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. It is no coincidence that it was Margaret Thatcher, a scientist and a free-marketeer, who was the first to raise the alarm on climate change, and it is no coincidence that the record of environmental devastation in the eastern bloc when we had command-and-control economies shamed the world.

This is not a party political point; it is merely an observation that the command-and-control economy in Venezuela has not only beggared its own people and made profligate use of hydrocarbons in a way that has led to environmental degradation, but socialism has trumped the environment as a cause, so their contribution to animal welfare has been to open a zoo to allow people to eat the wild animals. The truth is that the fundamentalist socialism that we have seen in Venezuela and the heedless selfishness exhibited by some other political leaders in other parts of the world are twin dangers. We need to face them down. Whether it is Bolsonaro in Brazil or Maduro in Venezuela, we need to say to those who do not put their people and their environment first, “We’re on your case. Free markets, free individuals and an Earth free of pollution are what people deserve.”

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Earlier, my right hon. Friend referred to the wonderful work that the UK is doing on the environment, and he has just mentioned other countries. Will he tell the House a bit about what pressure we are putting on other countries to play their part, because this really has to be a global effort?

Michael Gove: I hope I might have the opportunity to make it clear to the President of the United States when he comes here, perhaps over dinner—I will probably opt for a meat-free option on that evening—that as the world’s biggest polluter, he has to take responsibility. When it comes to the environment, I am ideologically colour blind: whether people come from blue states or red states, or from blue parties or red parties, the key question is, “Are you acting?” If they are acting, I will applaud.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way to a Member from the yellow party. He has spoken at length about his environmental credentials and what the Government are doing on the environment, but will he tell me why the Government are not supporting my Nappies (Environmental Standards) Bill?

Michael Gove: I have had the opportunity to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss his Bill, and we are looking into whether we can use the extended producer responsibility scheme to cover the initiative that he asks about. I am grateful to him for raising that point, because his proposed legislation draws attention to a defect, but I am not sure that it is absolutely quite right. I am happy to work with him to bring about change.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Secretary of State has talked about flowers and about honey; does he agree that although we talk a good game in Parliament, the parliamentary estate is an appalling environment for our pollinators? Through him, may I invite every MP present to join me in two weeks at the all-party group on bees and pollinators, where we are going to see a mock-up of what it would be like if we turned Cromwell Green into a wild-flower meadow and hosted a beehive that MPs could manage, thereby doing more than just talking?

Michael Gove: I absolutely agree. Of course, at DEFRA we have a beehive on our roof. Everyone can play their part.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend has been making points about national and international leadership, but we can all do more, including local councils. He will be aware that Conservative councils recycle or reduce waste by more than twice as much as Labour councils. Will he congratulate in particular North Kesteven District Council for its recycling of waste and for its recycling of waste?

Michael Gove: I will not give way for another few minutes. I am happy to congratulate North Kesteven District Council on its exemplary leadership. Of course, at local government level throughout the country there are leaders from all parties—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Although he is speaking quite audibly, I cannot hear the Secretary of State because there is so much noise. I thought people wanted to hear his answers to their questions.
Michael Gove: I am grateful for your help, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will give way again, but not for a few moments.

I wish to place on record my thanks to everyone in local government who contributes to improving recycling. We still need to do much more, which is why in the forthcoming Environment Bill we will put into effect some of the changes that our waste and resources strategy talks about, to ensure that we have uniform levels of recycling throughout the country and that we extend the extended producer responsibility scheme. It is a fact that overall, pound for pound, kilo for kilo, Conservative councils have a better recycling record than Labour councils, but I am more than happy to acknowledge—

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: No.

I am more than happy to acknowledge that there are individual Labour councils that do well and from which we can learn.

I said that we need to do more as a nation, which is why I am looking forward to the publication tomorrow of the report by the Committee on Climate Change, which was originally established by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). The programme of carbon budgets that the committee has set has enabled us to make significant progress so far in the meeting of our obligations to the earth, but we all know that we need to do more.

Last October, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made it clear that the Paris target of a 2°C temperature rise was, as the science showed, not ambitious enough and that we need to ensure that we slow the rate of greenhouse gas emissions and hopefully achieve net zero in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. After that IPCC report, my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Business, immediately commissioned the Climate Change Committee to tell us what we as a Government and as a society should do to meet that target. That level of ambition was endorsed by a range of different organisations, from the NFU, which says—

Michael Gove: indicated assent.

It is also important, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, that we not only take action on energy, decarbonise our economy and recognise the global challenge that we face, but we also need to do more on the environment.

The key thing that everyone across this House has to recognise—and to be fair to the Leader of the Opposition, he has acknowledged that coal—high-quality coal—can be part of the mix when it comes to, for example, steel production. There is a legitimate argument across this House about the pace at which we should reduce our reliance on coal, and no Government have gone faster to reduce our reliance on coal, the single most polluting hydrocarbon than this Government. When it comes to other hydrocarbons, in the mix, we know—

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): As we are talking about cross-party consensus, let me say that things are moving very fast in this debate. Whatever has been said about fracking in the past, it is not a transition fuel, but a fossil fuel. We should stop any new investment in any new technology that is based on fossil fuel. We must stop it. Will his Government finally commit to stop their support of fracking?

Michael Gove: I completely understand where the hon. Lady is coming from, but one thing that we all must acknowledge is that, as we strive to meet more ambitious targets for emissions, hydrocarbons will be part of that mix. To be fair to the Leader of the Opposition, he has acknowledged that coal—high-quality coal—can be part of the mix when it comes to, for example, steel production. There is a legitimate argument across this House about the pace at which we should reduce our reliance on coal, and no Government have gone faster to reduce our reliance on coal, the single most polluting hydrocarbon than this Government. When it comes to other hydrocarbons, in the mix, we know—

Michael Gove: I will not give way. The key thing that everyone across this House has to recognise—and to be fair to the Leader of the Opposition, he has recognised it—is that if we want to make progress and we want to have a higher level of ambition, we need to be realistic about what those trade-offs are, and we need to ensure that, where appropriate, gas can be part of the energy mix. It is a diminishing part, but it will be a part for the foreseeable future.

Michael Gove: I am not giving way at the moment. It is also important, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, that we not only take action on energy, decarbonise our economy and recognise the global challenge
that climate change presents, but do everything we can in our own country to adapt and to mitigate the effects of climate change. That is why this Government are committed to the planting of 11 million new trees. That is why the Countryside Stewardship and Woodland Carbon Fund has been created—to ensure that we reforest this country, which, as the right hon. Gentleman fairly pointed out, is one of the least forested in Europe.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: I will not give way at this stage.

We are lucky in this country to have a concentration of blanket bog and peatland, one of the most effective carbon stores in the world, and this Government are committed to restoring more than 6,000 hectares of peatland to a state where they can play their role in acting as a carbon sink. All of these steps are part of the 25-year environment plan, which is intended to ensure that, for the first time, we hand on to the next generation a restored environment. I am talking about more trees planted, more habitats restored to good or better status, more investment in clean air and water and, above all, more investment in making sure that the organic content of our soil is improved—a critical measure not just in improving fertility for future food production, but for dealing with carbon.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Secretary of State could not avoid giving way on the subject of soil. It saddens me—and I agree with what was said earlier—that this issue is being made into some kind of political football. It has been about not only the words, but, as he has demonstrated, the policies. Getting the policies right is the game changer. One of our game-changing policies is our clean growth strategy. Does he agree that that is the direction in which we have to go to really change minds and industry?

Michael Gove: There are few people who are more passionate about the environment than my hon. Friend, and she is absolutely right. The clean growth strategy, for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston). I will not give way at this stage.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I do want to take a number of interventions to ensure that Members across the House can make their points, but then I shall not take any more, because this debate is heavily oversubscribed and I want everyone to have the chance to speak. On that basis—and I will seek to be quick—I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston).

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has mentioned several times the importance of handing on to future generations. To that end, is he as impressed as I am, when we go round schools in our constituencies, at the level of concern and awareness about environmental issues and climate change? Can we praise all those who have helped to educate our young children to be aware of these issues, including some TV programme makers, who play a part in educating our young people?

Michael Gove: I absolutely agree. The role of many broadcasters, not least the BBC, has been inspirational. On Friday, I enjoyed the opportunity to visit Titterington School in the constituency of my hon. Friend, the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), where an incredibly impressive group of year 8 and year 9 children showed how they are combining enterprise by operating their own new company and making sure that recycling and renewables are at the heart of economic growth.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman spoke earlier about leadership. Will he celebrate with me the Labour council of Kirklees, which, in January, had already declared a climate change emergency? Does he agree that, as we have so much consensus, we could declare an emergency today and all go back to our constituencies and start campaigning? We cannot be on the wrong side of history in this regard.

Michael Gove: I agree with the hon. Lady. Lady that a high level of ambition on the part of local government is absolutely right, but the key question is not whether we declare an emergency—that is only one part of it—but whether we act. It is actions, not words, that count. Throughout this debate—I applaud the Leader of the Opposition for calling it—we have heard again and again about the series of actions being undertaken by this Government and about the series of actions that we intend to undertake, which show how seriously we are taking this. That is the real test.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I know that he, like me, will be celebrating Staffordshire Day today and praising the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust for the work it does to protect our wildlife. I would like to celebrate the work of the English Heritage, which is responsible for the conservation of our national heritage. I should like to celebrate today the work of the Environment Agency, which is responsible for the conservation of our watercourses. May I draw his attention to the fact that we have just gone through the longest period of coal-free electricity production since the industrial revolution? That is action by this Government.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That happened on Easter weekend. Let me also say that the beautiful Staffordshire moorlands contain some of the peatland and heathland that is such a valuable resource in so many ways.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I will not give way to everyone—just a few more. Then I will make some progress.

Mary Creagh: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way, and I welcome the change in his party’s policy on the forests, which—let us not forget—the Government planned to sell back in 2011. Does he share my concern that the country is currently set to miss its fourth and fifth carbon budgets? Does he also agree that the next spending review conducted by the Treasury has to set out how not just the economy but the entire Government purchasing processes and policies have to achieve net zero—that it should be a net zero spending review?

Michael Gove: Makes sense to me.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): As we produce a new agriculture and environment policy, we can plant a lot of trees along banks to mitigate flooding
while improving our environment and having great food at the same time. I very much welcome the policies that the Secretary of State is bringing forward.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to recognise the vital role that farmers and growers play—not just in providing us with food, but in ensuring that our countryside is beautiful and that we are fighting climate change. I particularly thank the leader of the National Farmers Union, Minette Batters, who has committed the NFU to having net zero agriculture by 2040. She is a fantastic champion not only for British food, but for our environment.

Chris Bryant: Home energy conservation is going to be vital if we are to achieve these goals. Many of the poorest households in the land unfortunately live in homes that are very difficult to insulate through traditional means. Is it not time that we introduced a new scheme that makes it possible for people like my constituents to do their bit?

Michael Gove: I absolutely take the hon. Gentleman’s point. We must ensure that new construction meets high standards not just in carbon emissions but in the provision of domestic heat. He is right that we need to look at retrofitting existing housing, particularly in some of the poorer areas of the country and in areas such as the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, where the case is most pressing.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in praising the Woodland Trust for the work that it is doing on the proposed 50 million tree northern forest, and the Forestry Commission, which grows all the trees in my constituency?

Michael Gove: I am hugely grateful for the national forest, which has taken former industrial areas in Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Leicestershire and rendered them even more beautiful. The Woodland Trust has been inspirational in Cheshire and areas of the northern forest, which we are planning to develop from Liverpool to Hull. Although the Forestry Commission does not always get everything right, I am more than happy to endorse and celebrate its work in Northumberland and Cumbria.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I can only really give way a couple more times.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am most grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. He mentioned peatlands, but 80% of our peatlands are damaged, and this accounts for 10% of our carbon dioxide emissions. Will he therefore explain why the Government are only putting £6 million a year into peatland restoration?

Michael Gove: It is actually £10 million.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. As he spoke about the regional aspects of the issue, may I ask him to work more closely with his colleague who is currently in the Sahel? There are areas of land, such as Vietnam, with paddy fields that are only about 1 metre above sea level. We are talking about the possible salination of agricultural area, and the consequent massive population movements caused by climate change. I very much welcome the efforts that the Secretary of State is making domestically, but how much is he doing with the embassy network around the world?

Michael Gove: All posts recognise the vital role that the UK has to play in ensuring that we deal with environmental and climate change challenges. Whether that means ensuring that we halt deforestation in Indonesia or that we deal effectively with the challenges of climate change in Vietnam or Bangladesh, we deploy our international development money and our overseas development assistance with exactly that goal. Is there more that we can do in the future? Absolutely, but as my hon. Friend pointed out—and as the Foreign Secretary is making clear today in the Sahel—this is an area where our moral responsibility for the world’s poorest, our own interest in global security and our debt to the next generation coincide.

I want to conclude simply by saying that there will be an opportunity in the environment Bill that we intend to bring before the House shortly—the first environment Bill for many years, a flagship measure—for Members across the House to work together to ensure that we have the highest standards of environmental protection. I have been grateful for the work undertaken by the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee to ensure that the Bill is improved. I have never seen a Bill come to this House that has not benefited from scrutiny, improvement and enhancement along the way.

The way in which the Bill will mark a step change in how this country tackles the twin challenges of climate change and our broader ecological degradation is a test for us all. Will we approach it in a spirit of constructive but determined energy? Will we use that legislation to say that we will all work together, as we worked together across parties in 2008 when the Climate Change Act was introduced, to demonstrate that Britain—the country that was responsible for the first industrial revolution—is powering a new green revolution?

The responsibility rests on us all to be honest and gracious about the achievements of other parties, as I was earlier about the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Environment Minister. But it is also incumbent on us all to recognise that, if we really believe that we face an emergency and a crisis, we should do as our forefathers did when this country faced emergencies and crises in 1914 and in 1940. We put aside partisanship, we recognised the sincerity on the other side and we acknowledged that both sides had made mistakes, but we had a shared ambition to prove that Britain could lead. We have led in the past in defence of freedom. Let us lead now in defence of our planet.
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I just say that it is about bloody time? Grave warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have been ignored by too many Governments and parliamentarians for far too long. Greenwashing and tinkering have been the order of the day. We have had Prime Ministers stating that they would run the greenest Government in history and saying, “Vote blue, get green.” We have had Ministers jetting around the globe to attend summits on how to address climate change. We have had sombre words and much head-shaking as hands were wrung and crocodiles asked for their tears back. Then, last week, a 16-year-old girl came here—an extremely impressive 16-year-old girl—and she was fawned over by some people who were anxious for some reflected glory. Suddenly, people are running around trying to look worried about this issue.

I should clarify that there have always been some voices that have been raised and that have carried warnings in this place and in others for some time. There are people who warned these Benches warning about global warming when it was less than fashionable to do so. Some were labelled cranks and crackpots, but they picked up those names and carried on, because the issue was so important. Those people have sat on Government Benches and Opposition Benches. Most will not now be remembered, and that will be okay by them. I am glad that the Secretary of State paid tribute to Roseanna Cunningham, who is now the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform in the Scottish Government. She was one such toiler. She suffered her time here as a Member in the 1990s, and she still rants about how hard she found it to get anyone to really listen to what needed to be done—not just to appear to be listening, nor to engage in a listening and engagement exercise, but actually to listen. Not that she bears a grudge.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the concrete actions that the Government could take to respond to this emergency is to ban fracking anywhere in the UK?

Deidre Brock: As the hon. Gentleman is probably aware, the Scottish Government have taken significant action on that issue, and I would very much like to see it taken across the UK as well. There is no place for fracking anywhere, in my opinion.

Roseanna Cunningham is now at the forefront of delivering on a programme to actually deliver on addressing climate change—an environmental policy that takes into account the needs of people and the need to hand on a working planet to future generations. She will tell us that she wants to do more, to deliver more and to solve all the problems and solve them now, but she knows, as do many who sit in this Chamber, that Government policy does not pivot so easily, and public attitude changes take time and effort to effect. That means that this needs the extra effort and extra attention that great changes usually need. We have to change the way we live—the way we conduct society. We have to be aware now that these changes will make life less comfortable. That is just how it is, though, and we should get on with it.

This is the one issue that might require us to put away the tools of political point-scoring and decide to work together for the survival of the species. We may not agree on the way forward, and we do not have to, but we can do that without losing sight of what we are driving at. The DEFRA Secretary—or Old Swampy, as I like to call him—and I can find ways to work together. I can offer him the benefit of vision that those of us who live in Scotland have of a Government working towards some serious and stretching targets to cut greenhouse gas emissions. We can chat about how the Scottish Government have put money into ensuring that there are enough charging points for electric vehicles to allow a target for phasing out petrol and diesel vehicles by 2032, and about funding electric buses and ultra low emission vehicles in the public fleet.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On working together, I am not sure if my hon. Friend is aware that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is apparently looking at allowing onshore wind in Scotland where the Scottish Government have embraced onshore wind, yet the Scottish Secretary has put in writing to BEIS his objection to Scotland getting access to onshore wind, and now the Departments are refusing to release that correspondence. Is that not disgraceful and the very opposite of working together?

Deidre Brock: I am indeed aware of that issue, and I do think it is disgraceful. I cannot see how the Secretary of State has a leg to stand on in this regard.

This needs ambition—not personal ambition, but political ambition and the desire to see future generations able to breathe on this planet. We need to challenge an old measure of Government success—the measure that says that the greatest good a Government can do is grow GDP—and start to measure success by how much the Government can do to ensure that there is a future where the sustainability of communities and the environment is a touchstone.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Does my hon. Friend agree that for all the glossy words of the Environment Secretary, what is needed is for Departments to work together? As she knows, Dalgety Bay beach in Scotland is still covered in radioactive particles, and the Ministry of Defence has dithered and delayed on this. Does she agree that that needs to be addressed urgently; that it cannot wait until next year, as seems to be getting suggested; and that the message has to go to the Government that Scotland is not Westminster’s nuclear dumping ground?

Deidre Brock: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. It has been three decades since radioactive particles were found on Dalgety Bay beach, and only now is the MOD finally committing itself to a clean-up of those particles. That is an utter disgrace. I would like, personally, to see an environmental audit of all MOD activities on Scottish land and water to see what that uncovers, and then, of course, the MOD paying for the clean-up operations.

We must have regard to the warning issued by the Governor of the Bank of England when he said that climate uncertainty was an economic risk and that climate challenges could become challenges in the financial markets. We have to see that, swallow it and move on. Action on climate change can be a threat to jobs, but inaction is a death knell, and not just to jobs. Mark Carney
also said that there was opportunity in the changes to come, and that we should embrace that and welcome the possibility of new industries and new jobs arising from new technology.

**Deidre Brock** (Con): I certainly will. My own two daughters’ knowledge of these important issues is so much greater than mine was at that age. The amount of work that is being put into this issue by students right across the UK is phenomenal; it is very impressive indeed. I really appreciate my hon. Friend bringing that up.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud): Like me, the hon. Lady spent many weeks in the Committee on the Agriculture Bill, which, if introduced properly, could take us forward, notwithstanding the implications of our membership of the EU. Is she rather surprised that that Bill is yet to come back to the House, months after it left Committee?

**Deidre Brock** (Con): Yes, I have to agree with the hon. Gentleman—it has surprised me how long the Bill has taken to reach the Floor of this House again. It was an interesting time in Committee. A number of the issues did not really concern Scotland, of course, as he will be aware, but there were some big issues that were not properly addressed by the Minister at the time. It might be that the Government are grappling with the issues around food production, for example, which, as he will know, was not even in the Bill.

To return to welcoming new industries and new jobs arising from new technology, that is why the Government should be reversing decisions they made to pull funding from renewables and to cut subsidies, denying researchers the tools they need to progress these new technologies. Nova Innovation, headquartered a few hundred metres from my constituency office in Edinburgh North and Leith, has recently installed tidal arrays off Shetland, gathering power from the sea and demonstrating that the UK is phenomenal; it is very impressive indeed. I really appreciate my hon. Friend bringing that up.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South): The hon. Lady is making a valuable contribution. On European funding for research and development, the Government will not guarantee replacing that money beyond 2020. That is a very important point. If the Government were really serious about doing something about climate change, they would step up and tell us exactly what is going to happen after 2020.

**Deidre Brock** (Con): The hon. Gentleman is correct. This is just another example of the uncertainty that the whole situation around Brexit has caused, and the Government refuse to clarify it for the many people who are waiting to see what the grants might be.

What offers are likely to be made by any potential UK Government in the next couple of years to address the causes of climate change and climate chaos? A change of Prime Minister might offer an opportunity to change direction, but I see few signs that anyone leading on policy development in either of the two largest parties has really heard any of the warnings. Changing our society will require some discomfort, some pain and some realignment of how we live, and that is unlikely to happen immediately. For example, we still depend on fossil fuel-powered vehicles to get our food to the shops, and often even to get it to our front doors—from truck, to ship, to truck, to home delivery van. We still depend on hydrocarbons to make fertilisers. We still have an addiction to plastic that defies all understanding, and a hankering for personal transport.

People changing their cotton buds and refusing straws in pubs is not enough. The average inhabitant of these islands will join in with efforts to change the way we live, happily or otherwise, but it needs leadership from Government, proper investment in reliable renewable energy production, investment in and subsidies for low-emission public transport, a real push against plastics, and an uptick in building standards on insulation and energy-efficient heating and lighting—and not just for houses.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is saying, but will she share her thoughts on how we manage the oil and gas industry in the UK over the next two or three decades?

**Deidre Brock** (Con): Absolutely. I would suggest something along the lines of the Scottish Government’s £12 million transition training fund, which was launched in 2016. The fund enables people who are in the oil and gas industry—about 240,000 jobs across the UK depend on it—to train and perhaps progress into the renewables industry—about 240,000 jobs across the UK depend on it—so that we can make use of the decommissioned oilfields.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): Further to that point, does my hon. Friend agree that the oil and gas industry could also be supported by implementing carbon capture and storage, which allows a low-carbon transition? That is where the UK Government are badly lacking, having pulled the £1 billion funding. That is where we need to go, and it could make use of the decommissioned oilfields.

**Deidre Brock** (Con): Absolutely. That is a crucial element. Unfortunately, as the National Audit Office told us, the two competitions on CCS were cancelled at a cost of some £140 million, and that needs to be looked at properly again. At the moment, there is a £20 million prize fund on CCS, but it is simply not sufficient.
This requires a change of Government—not a change of personnel; there is no point changing the hand on the rudder if the course is still towards the rocks—and a change in attitude, ambition and direction of travel. It requires change across every Department and every ministerial portfolio. It needs Government to engage with the people and civic society, and to drive this agenda forward. In spite of the couthie words often chuntered here about saving the planet, there has not been much evidence of action. This is one small corner of the world, and it cannot change global politics on its own, no matter what strange dreams Brexiters have. We have a duty and a moral obligation to do our bit to keep this world fit to hand on to the next generation, and it is about time we bucked up our ideas.

3.22 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): This debate really matters. It matters to the hundreds of thousands of people across our great nation and the world. This is the mother of all Parliaments. This is the country that had the first industrial revolution. It is our moral responsibility to come together as a Parliament and show the leadership that people across the world rightly expect of us. We today should be building on the radical political consensus that was achieved back in 2008, which brought all parties in the House together and gave any Minister standing at the Dispatch Box legally binding targets on reducing emissions.

I am confident, given the actions taken, that this Secretary of State and this Government will respond positively, enthusiastically and responsibly to the guidance they will receive tomorrow, which will set out why we need to move to net zero carbon by 2050 or sooner. We need today to put petty political point scoring to one side, recognise what this country has achieved and share that ambition to do more and faster.

Like every other Member, I know from going around my constituency that all parts of society we represent—whether schoolchildren, members of the women’s institute or the business community—are asking us to do more. They are also asking us what more they can do. This is about what not only we in this place do, but what our whole country will do—what businesses, public services and people will do. I know that people want to do the right thing, but sometimes they do not know what to do.

I want to make one simple point today, by sharing the great work of Luci Isaacsen and Climate Vision in my constituency. Back in 2009, she set up a simple 10-pledge challenge. She got 10 local ambassadors in Truro to recruit a whole team of us to make simple changes in our lives over four months, and between us, we saved more than 3,000 tonnes of CO₂. It was not virtue signalling or running out and buying the most expensive new electric vehicle. It was simple things that we can all do, like switching energy provider, which saves money as well as CO₂, or eating local, in-season produce and walking more often—all sorts of practical things that save us money, make us feel better and contribute to our local economy.

I set a challenge to every Member of the House today: I know they care very much about this issue and that many of them are riding bicycles and taking all sorts of action in their communities. I ask them to go to my website, look up the work of Climate Vision and make one of those pledges or all 10 of them, so that today we can all commit to reducing our own emissions. We are all leaders in our communities, and we can support and encourage everyone who wants to play their part and make a difference. They can use #10PledgeChallenge, so that together we can send out a strong message that as individual leaders, policy makers and Members of this mother of all Parliaments, we get it, and we are stepping up to the greatest challenge that we will face in our lifetimes.

3.26 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton). Her eloquent words on climate change show that the Front Bench’s loss is the Back Benches’ gain and this House’s gain.

The tone of this debate has been largely good-natured and about shared objectives, and that is important. This debate matters, and the emergency matters, because, contrary to what the Secretary of State implied, we are not doing nearly enough as a country. It is true that we have made a lot of progress in relation to the power sector, but 75% of the gains we have made overall since 2012 have been in that sector alone. The latest report of the Committee on Climate Change in 2018 says that emissions in the building sector, the agriculture sector, the waste sector and the fluorinated gases sector have been flat for a decade.

The emergency matters because it says to not only the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs or other Departments—the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is also on the Front Bench—but the whole Government that this matters to everyone and that this is not just another issue we have to deal with, alongside all the other issues we face. Every issue has to go through climate change and what we do about it. It is the whole basis of our politics for generations to come. I hope that the Secretary of State will support the emergency, because it will focus minds in the Government.

I do not want to speak for long, but I do want to talk about political persuasion and in particular about how we carry the public with us on this journey. Nice words were said about me, and I am grateful to both Front Benchers for that, but the truth is that I feel a sense of guilt. I feel a sense of guilt that I have not done more on this issue and that I did not do more when I was leader of my party. I talked about the issue, but I did not do more.

It is bad thing that in the 2015 TV debate, which I do not like to recall too much, not one question was asked about climate change, and that tells us something about the fact that Brexit—it is bad enough, given how it sucks the political oxygen out of all the other issues—is not the only reason why this issue has not been more salient, or rather that it goes through peaks and troughs. I think that the reason is that this is the ultimate challenge for politics, because the decisions we make now will have impacts in generations’ time, but less so today. The electoral cycle, if we are honest about it—and we respond to our voters—is five years, or perhaps less, not 20, 30 or 40 years.

Catherine West: I make a very quick intervention just to say that my right hon. Friend does not need to apologise, because he did write the emissions trading scheme when he was very much part of a Labour Government beforehand.
Edward Miliband: It is nice of my hon. Friend to say so.

I want to talk about how we persuade people, and I think there are four things we need to do. First, I enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who speaks from the Front Bench for the SNP, but I slightly disagreed with one thing. She said a couple of times that we need to tell people their lives are going to be less comfortable. I slightly feel that that is saying, “I’m here from Planet Politics to say you’re going to have a less comfortable life.” I do not mean this in a trite way—I think it true that sacrifices must be made—but we should promise people something else, which is that they will have better lives if we act on climate change. I do not think that is a false promise; I think that is a genuine promise.

If we think about this idea of the green new deal, what is that about? It is about retrofitting every building in this country—house by house, street by street—in the way we did in the 1960s and 1970s when we moved from town gas to natural gas. That is tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of jobs, including for my constituents and the constituents of every Member, and it is about lower bills for people. If we think about our towns and cities, we see that it is about making them much better for walking and cycling—and, indeed, electric vehicles—cutting thousands of deaths from air pollution.

My first and in a way most important point is: let us tell people not just the gloomy part of this—it is important to talk about the gloomy part—but that they can have better lives as a result. That is what we are in politics to do.

Secondly, I want to say something about the role of individuals, because I have come to believe that there is something slightly dangerous in this. Every individual has to do their bit, including we politicians, but I think there is something that makes people feel incredibly powerless if we put all the weight of responsibility on individuals. Sometimes we cannot necessarily do that we do at the system change, not just individual change. Some of this goes to support energy companies, which the Secretary of State talked about, we have to think about how those costs are borne through taxation as opposed to energy bills. Unless we do that, people will say, “Well, hang on. The costs are all falling on me, and I can least afford it.” We only need to look at what has happened to President Macron and the protests he has faced to realise that we cannot just say, “It’s green and therefore it’s fair.” We have to make sure that the costs are fairly distributed.

My fourth and final point is about the international angle. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who is not in his place, wrote recently that Extinction Rebellion should go and protest in China, while he seemed modestly to approve of some of its aims. That misses the point: as Secretaries of State and the House know, the reality is that our moral authority comes from our being able to act. There is no way we could persuade China and India to act themselves if we were not leaders on this issue.

My experience at the not-very-successful Copenhagen summit was that China and India would listen to us because, unlike the US, we were actually acting. I cannot emphasise enough to the House the authority that our ability to act gives us. By the way, the Chinese recognise the opportunity. They are installing so much solar and wind power because they know that there is an economic advantage. The issue is particularly crucial in the next 15 to 18 months because of our hope to host COP—the conference of the parties—in 2020. That is the moment when we have to update the Paris targets. We are overshooting, even on the basis of the Paris targets. Unless that conference of the parties takes decisive action, it may well be too late.

Sir Edward Davey: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on China; it is vital that people understand this. The Chinese are moving ahead very fast. He and his colleagues, and the former Foreign Secretary Lord Hague, were crucial in making sure that the Foreign Office was engaged in climate change diplomacy, persuading the Chinese that the fall in the cost of renewables, particularly solar, made them affordable and that the health benefits of reducing air pollution made them really attractive to their population. The change in the mood in China could be the change in the mood across the world. We need to learn from China, support it and make those points.

Edward Miliband: I agree absolutely with the former Secretary of State.

I want to finish by saying this. I reflect on our cross-party consensus in this country, which is incredibly important. It was created in part thanks to David Cameron’s advocacy of the issue in the 2000s, and it is important that we maintain it. However, we should allow this: there will be different visions of how we get to the same goal. There will be a more socialist vision and a more Conservative one. Part of the grammar of politics that we have to learn is to argue while sharing the same objectives—maintain the cross-party consensus, but have discussions and arguments about how we can meet our goals.
Finally, I should say that there is a downside scenario, which is that future generations will say that we were the last generation who did not get it and we failed to act. But there is an upside, too: if we act, we can create better lives for those future generations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. There is now a formal time limit of five minutes.

3.37 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), with whom I share a role in my membership of the all-party parliamentary climate change group. That is very much cross-party. I share some of the right hon. Gentleman’s frustration. I have been an environmental campaigner all my life—Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace. I used to be anti-nuclear, actually, although I am not anymore because it is low carbon. I vowed that if I ever came to Westminster, I would get involved in this agenda. Guess what? I have, and we are doing things. I am deeply frustrated about some of the misinformation peddled about the supposed lack of things we are doing.

There have been many good achievements, as the Secretary of State said, although that is not to say that there is not more to do. We have cut gas emissions by 25% and are phasing out coal-fired power stations. We have a renewables agenda and all the jobs. That is good work, but without a shadow of a doubt the degradation of the planet and the situation with climate change is very severe. We need to do more and quicker—I am not going to argue about that.

As I have said in this Chamber before, this issue is definitely bigger than Brexit. I reiterate the calls being made today for net zero emissions. I raised that in a question to the Prime Minister last week. I mean it, and I believe that our Government will absolutely mean business when we hear the advice of the Committee on Climate Change tomorrow.

All the Taunton Deane people I have met—Taunton Green Parents, the Extinction Rebellion people whom I met up here and all sorts of religious people of every shape and form—have asked me to put the environment at the top of the agenda. People care.

However, to really radically cut emissions and realistically hit the 2030 target, there has to be some really big thinking. As other Members have said, we are capable of sorting this out. It will require more of the right policies; we have good policies, but we need more of them. It will require driving societal change and investment into the right infrastructure and science, with vision, targets, market mechanisms and regulation that we check regularly to make sure it is all working. The overarching umbrella has to be sustainability. If we put sustainability over every single thing we do so that every Department comes under it, we cannot go wrong. Without sustainable soil, water, air and biodiversity, we simply cannot live. We can live for a short while, for one generation, but without a sustainable planet we cannot be sustainable.

We need to line up our policies perhaps more cleverly than we are doing right now. One small example is the clean growth strategy, which I applaud. It needs to align itself much better with the prosperity fund. There is a bit of a conflict between the drive for ever more growth and productivity. We need to get sustainability in such initiatives as the prosperity fund.

I honestly think that every single person out there can share this with us. I genuinely think it is really exciting that we need to change society to solve this crisis. As the right hon. Member for Doncaster North said, it might be a bit uncomfortable but I think there will be great benefits. We will be healthier, because we will be cycling and walking, providing we put in the right framework for cycle lanes and walkways. We could have vehicle-free streets. How lovely would Taunton look if we did that? We could have prettier towns and not be breathing in fumes.

Steve Brine: Although today’s debate was opened by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and will be closed by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, does my hon. Friend agree that this issue is cross-governmental? The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has a huge role to play. At the weekend, Cycle Winchester saw hundreds of us cycling through Winchester as part of a mass cycle ride. The city of Winchester has about as much designated safe cycle way as the length of this Chamber. Local government has a huge role to play to make the change she talks about in respect of cycling.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. Only yesterday, I went to a superb event on cycling here, hosted by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), where that exact point was made. We need to take up many of that event’s recommendations. I agree that communities and local government are key, because they drive our developments and our homes. We need more eco-friendly, energy-efficient homes releasing less carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, with much more energy-efficient heating systems. I had a 10-minute rule Bill not very long ago which called for better consultation in this area and to embrace technologies. We have to ask ourselves how we are going to do all this. We have the clean growth strategy. As I said earlier, science and technology will play a really important role, but we need to put more capital in and we need a plan for raising capital to invest in the future technologies that we need to introduce at pace.

On the wider environment, we have such an opportunity to change our land use: the way we use our land and the demands we make on it; the natural capital impact approach; paying for public services and goods, so we plant more trees and have better soil management that holds and captures carbon, and helps to control flooding. All of those issues are important and we have the opportunity, if we can get it right, with the 25-year plan, the Agriculture Bill and the forthcoming environment Bill. This is a very exciting opportunity, but we have to get it right.

On transport, I am the chairman of the all-party group on electric and automated vehicles. This will be a big, growing and important agenda. I think the Committee on Climate Change will set us even stricter targets on getting rid of diesel and petrol cars, so we have to get the infrastructure in place right now. We have to get the
issue of storage sorted out, because it will be so important going forward. I have not mentioned carbon capture, but it could be a really big part of this agenda if we invest in it correctly.

I honestly believe that this could be the new green revolution and I am pleased to be a part of it. We should all be a part of it. I know we will and I look forward to the announcement from the Committee on Climate Change.

3.43 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Last year’s IPCC report could not have been any clearer: we have just 12 years to take real action. That is not 12 years to debate whether we need to take action, but 12 years to implement policies that dramatically cut down on our carbon emissions and change how we, as individuals, live our lives. That needs to start today. It may not be fashionable these days, but we need to heed the advice of experts. Dr Dmitry Yumashev of Lancaster University recently published research showing the potential $70 trillion cost if we fail to take action and meet our targets. We simply cannot afford—financially or otherwise—to continue down the same route we have been on.

I will talk briefly about young people. I am proud that the Labour-led Lancaster City Council has already declared a climate emergency; it was one of the first councils to do so. That was led by our young activists across the Lancaster district, and I pay tribute to Councillor Amara Betts-Patel, Councillor Oliver Robinson, Peter Curphey, Hadid Malik and Dan Chester, to name but a few of the young people calling on their council to do more and to put forward bold policies to tackle this crisis. The onus is now on us in the House to listen to the words of young activists up and down the country and globally and to put climate change at the forefront of everything that we do.

It is clear that we need to do more on how we travel about our communities. We need to make the switch to public transport, but in Fleetwood it could not be more evident how far away we are from having a sustainable transport policy. Every morning, hundreds of my constituents get into their cars and drive down the A585 to access jobs and education. If they were given a reliable, low-carbon alternative, I know that many would ditch their cars and jump on public transport, so the Government really need to get serious about investing in sustainable transport for communities such as Fleetwood, so that people can make that switch. That means urgently rebalancing our transport spending towards communities such as Fleetwood and to the north-west of England, bringing back into use disused rail lines that were cut by Beeching and making sure that people have the chance to use greener alternatives to cars.

Harnessing the power of wind and water has huge potential to transform Lancashire into a true energy coast. Hydro, wind, and solar energy industries have the potential to provide thousands of skilled, highly paid jobs, which will transform employment prospects for our young people while providing for our energy needs. The beginnings of this green economy are already visible in Fleetwood: I recently visited 4Navitas, which builds vertical-axis wind turbines and which was set up and is run by Fleetwood entrepreneurs Paul Cook and Marcus Stefani. Other Fleetwood entrepreneurs have been pursuing plans to construct a hydro barrage across the River Wyre, which again has huge potential to transform the town.

Sadly, the Government continue to ignore the potential of this new green economy and persevere with damaging and unwanted policies, such as fracking. The people of Lancashire said no to fracking. It is not compatible with meeting our climate change objectives, and it is time that the Government woke up and banned fracking in this country, as the Labour party has proposed.

The Government need to lead the charge for a sustainable future, but that does not mean that individuals and communities cannot take a stand. I was pleased to support the Extinction Rebellion activists in Lancaster last week, who were demonstrating about the need to change the way we live our lives and standing up for a green future. Part of that future needs to involve making sustainable choices about how we live and what we eat. Most scientists now agree that we need to eat significantly less meat to tackle climate change, and we need to recognise the real damage that intensively farmed meat has on the ecosystems of developing nations.

I believe that only a Labour Government who place the environment at the front and centre of Government policy and usher in this green industrial revolution will succeed in halting the slide to environmental chaos. Future generations will not forgive us if we do not take this opportunity for positive action. We owe it to our children to seize this opportunity and to vote today to declare a climate emergency.

3.48 pm

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am grateful for your calling me early, Madam Deputy Speaker, and for being able to contribute—albeit briefly—to the debate. I start by agreeing with the Leader of the Opposition; he was right to call for consensus on tackling climate change. I also thought it entirely appropriate that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs clearly showed the cross-party support for delivering on the UK’s ambition and global leadership in this area, as well as pointing out how far the UK is delivering on this agenda. We need to introduce some balance into this debate, and I am pleased that both did so. I join others—on both sides of the House—in suggesting that we should proceed with efforts for London to host next year’s climate change conference. I very much hope that it does.

I am a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, and as such have the opportunity to review the Committee on Climate Change’s and activists’ claims and challenges, as well as to hold the Government to account on the delivery of the sustainable development goals and their climate change priorities. I was pleased therefore to support my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) when he yesterday introduced his 10-minute rule Bill, which was very well supported by Conservative Members. It is absolutely right that the House seek to commit to net zero emissions by 2050, and this in itself will require facing up to many significant challenges—some have already been mentioned. I am sure others will be—on land use, transport, energy sources, energy efficiency, joining up Government policy and showing international leadership to share the burden across the globe.
Taking that further and faster, however, as some have called for, would increase the challenge. As a farmer, I join the Secretary of State in applauding the NFU for accepting a net zero emissions challenge for agriculture by 2040. This will require very significant changes to land use, as has been graphically highlighted by the “Zero Carbon Britain” report from the Centre for Alternative Technology, which shows that diversifying land use is required across most of what we currently do today. We would need to double the land used for food for human beings in this country; to dramatically reduce the grassland for livestock; to double the forested area to a quarter of the entire UK; and substantially to increase the areas for biomass and renewable energy.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. On reforestation, did he share my enthusiasm for the Secretary of State’s remarks today about planting 11 million trees across the country? Could this not fire up schools’ imagination? We could get them to do much more of this and maybe the country? Could this not fire up schools’ imagination? We could get them to do much more of this and maybe

Mr Dunne: That is well worth doing—we should encourage younger generations to recognise the power that trees have in capturing carbon—but 11 million trees goes nowhere near what would be required to get to net zero. It is a step in the right direction but only a single step.

Brexit and leaving the common agricultural policy provide the UK with a unique opportunity to take a lead, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is doing through the Agriculture Bill, in developing a new system of support to encourage such change in land use. While it will not be easy, it is absolutely right that we take full advantage of this opportunity.

We have heard much about the problems and challenges of meeting these targets but very few solutions offered yet in this debate, so I would like to highlight two. Innovation and maturing technology will create opportunities and solutions and drive down costs—as we have seen, solar costs have declined by 35% in the last three years alone—but a balance of technologies will be required; there will be no simple single solution.

There has been considerable focus—my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) mentioned it earlier—on the switch to electric vehicles, but this will pose very significant generation challenges. One example provided to me recently suggests that one motorway service station replacing 20 petrol and diesel pumps with 120 electric superchargers—the number needed to fuel the same number of vehicles in an hour—would require a 14.5 MW substation, which is equivalent to the electricity required for 32,000 homes. This is, then, unlikely to be the simple solution that some of us hope for, so I would like to make a quick plug for hydrogen fuel cell generation, which can become cheaper than batteries and is being pioneered by a small company, Riversimple, which was started in my constituency. It has the added benefit of reducing reliance on coal, which is required for batteries and is itself a finite resource.

The second solution is for changing attitudes and behaviour in an area of UK global strength—it is something I have taken a particular interest in on the EAC: the UK’s leadership role on emerging green finance initiatives. This was set out in our Committee report last year, “Greening Finance: embedding sustainability in financial decision making”. Climate risk reporting by companies and pension funds will make clear the financial implications of ignoring climate change and provides an opportunity for the UK to show global leadership.

3.54 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne). I agree with him that we should consider the possibility of using hydrogen in our fuel networks, which could be an interesting development.

I last had the opportunity to speak about this issue in February, when we had our first debate on climate change in the main Chamber for two years. It was only a short Back-Bench debate on net zero emissions, and it remains disappointing that Back Benchers and the Labour party rather than the Government are instigating debates on this crucial issue. I spoke then about the devastating changes that I had seen in the Great Barrier Reef between my visits, the first 25 years ago and the second just a couple of years ago. I congratulated the organisers of the Glastonbury festival on their decision to ban plastic bottles—in passing, I encourage other festival organisers to do the same—and I talked about giving up my car and trying to rely on public transport and cycling.

Given the limited time available, I will not repeat those remarks, but I am pleased to support Labour’s challenge to the Government to declare an environment and climate emergency. Such a declaration would convey the gravity of where we are with climate change. It would constitute a recognition that we are now left with a limited window of time in which to mitigate the worst of the damage that we have done—the Leader of the Opposition described the scale of the crisis comprehensively in his opening speech—and an invitation to other Governments to do the same. No other Government have declared a climate emergency, and doing so would make the UK a world leader, just as the last Labour Government led the world in passing the first binding climate change Act. It would also send a signal to the Extinction Rebellion protesters, the striking schoolchildren and the young people I speak to in schools in my constituency that we are listening and will act with urgency—for it is urgent action that we need.

Acting in the context of a climate emergency means setting ambitious goals and achieving them with commitment and motivation. What is happening now in Manchester is a good example of the action that can be taken at local level by those who are serious about their green ambitions. Last year Manchester held its first green summit and launched the first city region-wide plan to eliminate single-use plastics. Just over a month ago it held a second summit, focusing on the five-year environment plan.

Greater Manchester generates roughly 3.6% of our total UK carbon dioxide emissions, and we have acknowledged our responsibility to make our contribution to meeting targets. Ours is a cross-cutting approach that recognises and demonstrates the range of actions that we need to take. Manchester has looked into how to reduce CO₂ emissions and improve air quality as part of its transport plan. There are plans for new building developments to be zero carbon by 2028 and for existing...
[Jeff Smith]

housing to be retrofitted to increase efficiency, which is a big economic opportunity, and extensive plans to create clean air zones and tackle nitrogen dioxide exceedances. That is all part of our aim to make Manchester a carbon-neutral city by 2038, which is a suitably ambitious goal for the city that started the first industrial revolution and needs to be a leader in the next—the green industrial revolution.

I do not have enough time, but I would love to be able to say more about the importance of climate change as a social justice issue. It disproportionately affects the most marginalised members of society—it is often the poorest families who live in urban areas with high levels of pollution—but the biggest injustice of all is the fact that poorer countries that have contributed less to global warming are being disproportionately hit by its effects. The lives of people living in the global south are already being torn apart because of the actions that we have taken in the past. The United Kingdom has a moral obligation to set and reach ambitious carbon emissions targets, not just for the sake of our people’s health and environment, but to offset our global contribution. As a wealthy nation, we must also offer financial support for climate mitigation and adaptation efforts by countries in the global south that are affected by extreme weather events.

I regularly visit local schools, and, overwhelmingly, young people want to raise two issues: climate change and plastic pollution. When I speak to those young people, I say that we must all accept our responsibility to play our part, whether by eating less meat, reducing the number of car and plane journeys or avoiding single-use plastics. However, we must also match that individual ambition with legislation. We must tackle this issue as a nation. We urgently need legislation to update the Climate Change Act.

There are many other actions that we need to take, which have been outlined by other Members. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), we have a massive opportunity. As we update the Climate Change Act, we must tackle individual ambition with legislation. We must match our obligations to set and reach ambitious carbon emissions targets, not just for the sake of our people’s health and environment, but to offset our global contribution. As a wealthy nation, we must also offer financial support for climate mitigation and adaptation efforts by countries in the global south that are affected by extreme weather events.

Before coming to this House I was lucky enough to have a career in the field of science and innovation, founding and financing companies with incredibly exciting solutions to some of the grand challenges we face, mainly in the field of medical, clean tech and agri-tech, and as an MP I have been lucky enough to work in the Department of Energy and Climate Change and as Life Sciences Minister. It is important that we all agree that there is an environmental emergency in the world, and that we send the message that we get it. It is also important that we admit that this is very complex and that, as the great David Attenborough himself put it to me, we should be every bit as worried about biodiversity and the damage to habitats around the world as about the impact of climate change and the importance of mitigating it. The truth is this problem is being driven across the world by massive industrialisation, deforestation and urbanisation, and those seeing their life chances transformed by the agricultural and industrial revolutions driving those changes do not want us in the west to hold back their prosperity; instead they want us to reach out and help them deliver a model of clean green growth.

I absolutely agree with those who suggested this should also be at the heart of our DFID strategy. I would like a much more muscular alignment of our aid, trade and security, including our biosecurity, because economic resilience is key to prosperity around the world.

Secondly, on science and innovation, I want to pay tribute to some of those who have not just jumped on the bandwagon but have spent their careers in science trying to develop the science behind this important debate. I am thinking of those at the British Antarctic Survey, the scientists I have been lucky enough to meet and work with at Cambridge and the University of East Anglia, and those who have been working on battery technology, which holds the key to unlocking the power of electricity and electric sustainable power. I am thinking, too, of those in agri-tech; I was lucky enough to launch the agri-tech strategy, and incredible work is going on to reduce plastics, water and soil impact in modern farming. I am thinking of those in the automotive and aerospace industries; I recently visited Lotus in Norfolk, which has developed a Formula 1 car powered by biofuel, made by genetically modified bugs breaking down agricultural waste. This is great science holding great potential for our green economy. Indeed, the aerospace industry is currently embarked on taking 400 million tonnes of carbon dioxide out of its footprint. Let us not criticise those on the cutting edge of trying to develop the technologies, and let us neither be complacent.

Thirdly, on the Conservative party’s track record and legacy, may I support the Secretary of State in his work and remind him and my colleagues on this side of the House that it was this party that led the first Clean Air Acts, it was this party’s leader Lady Thatcher who first put this challenge on the agenda of global leaders, and it was this party that, through its values of stewardship, conservation, incentives and responsibility and its belief in prosperity—in giving and taking responsibility and in the principle of mutuality and harnessing rewards and incentives—has used the market to drive an economics of shared values as much as of share value?

This party understands how we achieve green growth and, at the risk of going all Monty Python on you, Mr Speaker, and asking “What have the Conservatives...
ever done for the environment?” let me say that this year we have reached a high in renewable energy, we are reducing emissions faster than any other G20 nation, and we have put £92 billion into clean energy and created 400,000 jobs. I do not mean to be complacent for a moment but let us inspire the next generation by resisting tribal politics, being led by science and being inspired by what innovation can achieve.

4.4 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a great honour to be able to make my maiden speech during this debate on climate change. This topic is very close to my heart, and I am so pleased to see the importance that is being attached to it here in this House. I stand here today as the newest Member of Parliament, representing my home constituency of Newport West. I feel very proud and privileged to be able to do this, but of course, as colleagues across the House know, I am only here because of the sad passing of my honourable predecessor, Paul Flynn.

Paul was so well known and admired here in this House, but also in Newport West. During the by-election campaign, there would be someone in virtually every street in which we knocked who told us of how Paul had helped them or a member of their family. He was so well known, so respected and so loved by everyone in Newport West. Here in Westminster, fellow Members have taken the time to tell me stories of Paul and what a great man he was. We all know how intelligent and quick-witted he was, but he was also very kind and considerate. I only knew him for the last 15 years of his life, Members in this House have known him much longer—but he always took the time to talk to me and others in Newport and, just as importantly, he listened to what people said to him. His sense of humour was legendary and his ability to use a one-line response to close a debate was something to witness.

Paul is one of the main reasons I am here. He inspired people to go further than they thought possible. I will always be indebted to him for his advice and guidance, and yes, of course, I have a copy of his book “How to be an MP”, and I am proud that Paul signed it for me. Paul was one of a kind. He had such a great intellect and an ability to speak on a vast range of subjects. I may not have his parliamentary experience, but I will strive to match his qualities. I will maintain an independence of thought and I will be a socialist to my colleagues in this House.

Newport West is a relatively new constituency, having been formed only in 1983. Paul was the second Member and he was here for 32 years. I am not sure I can promise the House that I will be here for that long, but I am proud to be the first woman Member for Newport West. I am also only the second woman Member in W gwent and the 20th female MP in Wales ever. Sisters, we are getting there—but slowly!

Newport West is a great constituency, built on the back of the industrial revolution. Initially developed as a port, it quickly developed into a town that welcomed people from all areas and countries who settled and developed their own communities within the town. It has always been a place that welcomed the stranger. Work was mainly based in heavy industrial areas such as steel manufacturing, but in recent years it has developed in high-tech areas such as Proton Partners International, the first proton beam cancer therapy treatment centre in the UK. We also have high profile facilities such as the Celtic Manor resort, which hosted the successful Ryder cup in 2010 and the NATO summit in 2014.

Newport became a city in 2002. It has continued to grow and develop, but it has maintained its sense of community and the people are friendly and welcoming. I am proud to be a Newportonian. It is a city with its own character and quirks. We hold our own with the likes of Cardiff and Bristol—[Interruption.] We do! We have our own identity and we relish our role as the underdog. That was well evidenced during the recent FA cup run of our very own Newport County football club, whose wins over Leicester and Middlesbrough in the third and fourth rounds were watched by thousands of us. We celebrate our successes well!

Newport is also the place where the Chartists marched in 1839 to demand democratic rights and were mown down at the bottom of Stow Hill. The bodies of those killed that day were taken and buried in secret in the grounds of St Woolos Cathedral. Members would all be most welcome to come along on 4 November when we commemorate this important event in our fight for democracy and rights for all. Newport was there, and I am proud to be a citizen of that city.

But the people of Newport West are hurting after years of austerity. The numbers of homeless people are growing, families are suffering and older people are being forced to choose between heating their homes and eating. Yes, we have record employment, but much of it involves low-paid or minimum-wage work or zero-hours contracts. Some people have to take on two jobs just to keep a roof over their head. That is not right, and I am here to speak out on behalf of those people in my constituency. They are not asking for outlandish wage increases or unrealistic improvements in their terms and conditions. They just want a fair crack of the whip. They want job security, a safe place to live, freedom from crime and the fear of crime and to know that their family members can have a good quality of life. That is not unreasonable, and I am here to help them achieve it.

I was born and brought up on the Gaer, an area of Newport West. I went to Duffryn High School, the local comprehensive, and trained as a physiotherapist in Cardiff. I spent 32 happy years in a job that was rewarding and enjoyable. I worked with people with long-term conditions, such as stroke, MS, Parkinson’s and cerebral palsy. It was a real privilege to be able to work with patients and their families to empower and enable them to reach their maximum potential, but I also had to speak out to ensure that people who were unable to speak for themselves got the care and treatment they needed. Physiotherapists are good at understanding what people need and speaking out to ensure that they get it. I plan to continue to speak out in that way in this House.

I am here today to thank my predecessor Paul Flynn for his diligent, untiring work for Newport West over 32 years. I want to pick up his mantle and carry on his good work, speaking up for the people of Newport West and the issues and difficulties they face. With God’s grace and the help of colleagues, family and friends, I will do that. Thank you.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!
Mr Speaker: Many congratulations to the hon. Lady. We look forward to hearing from her a great deal more in the future.

4.11 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May I be the second to congratulate most warmly the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on an accomplished maiden speech? Her love of and passion for her constituency shone out in everything she said.

We have done well on climate change, because PwC reports a 42% cut in emissions since 1990, but we are all here today because we know that we must do more and that the need is urgent. Whether from younger people or from Back Benchers across the House, a challenge generally leads to better government and better results. I want to be positive and to point to five areas that are part of the solution. To be fair, the Government are involved in part in all of them, but they need to go further in some.

We have already had mention of electric vehicles and hydrogen vehicles, and I welcome the investment in battery technology and the Government’s efforts so far. However, we have heard today that Norway is far ahead of us, and 1.03 million new energy vehicles, as they are called, were sold in China in the first 11 months of last year, which is an increase of 68%, so we cannot rest on our laurels. I look forward to when ultra low emissions vehicles become more affordable so that more people can buy them.

There is one easy win in the area of transport—this would also deal with air pollution—and that is to take greater action on engine idling, something which New York has done recently with proper enforcement powers. Westminster City Council has its #DontBeIdle campaign, and we could and should do something across the UK about idling. Cycling and walking will also be part of the solution, and I am proud to be the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary cycling group. Roughly 2% of journeys in the UK are made by bike, but the numbers for Germany and the Netherlands are around 10% and 25% respectively. We can go further, but we must mainstream cycling funding, and new roads in particular need to be cycle-friendly. We are not quite there yet.

On aviation, unbelievably, electric planes have a future. I must admit that when I first read about them I had to check that it was not 1 April, but easyJet is looking to bring out a nine-seater prototype this year. By 2027, easyJet and Ryanair are hoping to fly some commercial routes up to distances of 500 km, so aviation can have an electric future, certainly in short-haul flights, and we should welcome that.

We have heard a lot about retrofitting, but why are not all new homes being built as zero-energy-bill homes? I was privileged to welcome the British architect Bill Dunster OBE to my constituency, and he is building such homes now. Not only do they address the climate issue, but not having to pay gas and electricity bills can be critical in helping our low-income constituents to look after their families. We need to accelerate that. The Building Research Establishment in Watford has proved that the technology is there, and we should be doing much more on that front.

We have heard about the forests we are planting, with 50 million trees to be planted in the northern forests and another 11 million trees being planted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am one of probably many MPs who were privileged to send 10 trees to their constituency from the ‘Commonwealth canopy’ scheme organised by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and that is something we can do, too.

The subject of this debate includes the environment, about which we have not spoken much today, particularly our wildlife. I am privileged to live in a constituency in which, when I go home in the evening, I see deer, muntjacs, foxes, rabbits, pheasants, partridges, woodpeckers, goldfinches, nuthatches and many other wonderful forms of wildlife. We need to make sure they can exist, too.

My constituency also hosts Duke of Burgundy and chalk hill butterflies, and butterflies are one of the creatures most in danger from climate change. Only a very small increase in temperature can cause them difficulties.

In summary, I want a future that is green and profitable, and for which we help our poorer constituents to adapt.

4.16 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): On behalf of Labour Members, I pay tribute to our new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). I have the unenviable task of following what was a truly beautiful maiden speech. I look forward to working alongside her in the months and years to come.

Like my hon. Friend, I want to speak about my constituency today. I represent one of the two constituencies that make up Calderdale, and nowhere feels extreme weather more acutely than Calderdale. The Calder Valley and Halifax constituencies experienced catastrophic flooding in the 2015 Boxing day floods, which affected 2,720 residential properties and 1,650 businesses, and we were lucky not to sustain more damage in March 2019 following a period of exceptionally heavy rainfall that pushed flood defences to the limit.

One of the most serious and immediate consequences of climate change is more frequent extreme weather events, which are a very real and terrifying prospect. One element of the response to such dangers locally that is worthy of mention has been the work of Calderdale’s “slow the flow” volunteers, whose natural flood management work across the Calder valley took the force out of the rainwater as it made its way down our steep slopes. Their work made a significant difference during the periods of greatest intensity during the March near-miss rains. Natural flood management not only contributes to a degree of protection from excess water, but does so through greater and more responsible stewardship of our natural environment.

I am pleased to say that the Labour-run Calderdale Council is already ahead of the game on climate change, having declared a climate emergency in January in response to the warning from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that there are just 12 years left to limit global warming.

Calderdale Council has succeeded in cutting its own CO₂ emissions by 35% and the borough’s by 26%. Although Calderdale is on track to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 40% by 2020, we know this is not enough. Further action will be needed if we are to deliver the reductions necessary to keep global temperature rises below 1.5°C.
There are another two particular pressures across Calderdale that bring this global challenge to our doorstep. The first is that so many other parts of the country is air quality. We have seven designated air quality management areas in Calderdale, where monitoring indicates the annual mean objective for nitrogen dioxide being exceeded. The most recent figures from Public Health England show that the number of deaths from respiratory conditions is significantly higher in Calderdale compared with the national average. Although there are a number of reasons for that, poor air quality is a significant factor.

I am pleased to say that Calderdale has responded with a comprehensive air action plan, with a view to declaring Sowerby Bridge, one of our worst affected areas, a low-emissions neighbourhood. The plan prioritises the promotion of ultra low emissions vehicles and public transport, alongside walking and cycling, as well as promoting the clean-up of public transport fleets. Calderdale Council is also defending at a public inquiry its decision to reject an application to build an incinerator in the area. In the interests of air quality, I have made my views on the issue very clear.

Another initiative is the launch of the “Electric Valley” petition, building on the work of the Halifax and district rail action group electric charter, which sets out the benefits of electrification of the Calder Valley line. If we are to take vehicles off the road and ask more people to use public transport, electrification is a win-win. Not only has the Calder Valley line, which connects Manchester and Leeds through Halifax, been plagued with problems in recent months, but it is a dirty route. With electrification, we can improve the journey and clean it up at the same time. That was the top recommendation of the northern electrification taskforce “Northern Sparks” report four years ago, so I hope that the Department for Transport is watching the debate and will revisit that report.

The final threat that I want to raise is wildfire. Heatwaves have resulted in an increased frequency of wildfires on Pennine moorland. The Pennine moors, covering Kirklees, Calderdale and parts of Bradford, include sites of special scientific interest and special areas of conservation. Moorland areas are instrumental in storing CO₂—it is estimated that Britain’s peat bogs store the equivalent of 10 times the country’s CO₂ emissions—but when peat bogs are damaged by pollution or wildfire, they start to leak CO₂ instead of storing it. That has happened more and more often, with two blazes on Saddleworth moor in the last 18 months and a fire on Ilkley moor just two weeks ago.

It is far too easy to think that this is a problem for someone else, somewhere else, or for the next generation to solve. Calderdale Council has taken its responsibilities incredibly seriously, but it needs holistic Government support to deliver a carbon-neutral future. I hope that sharing those examples of how climate change is on our doorstep in Calderdale every single day will motivate us all to take action.

4.21 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I want to make three very brief points, which I hope will not repeat anything that has been said so far. The first relates to the tone and nature of the debate. It is enormously to be welcomed that there is once again consensus across the House of Commons in favour of taking this issue very seriously.

I recall the time I first went to see, in his then role as Environment Secretary, the brother of the former leader of the Labour party. I put it to the then Environment Secretary that the Conservative party, whose policy review I was running, was prepared to move forward on a climate change Bill, and he said to me, rather memorably, that he could not see any way to prevent consensus from breaking out. It did so, and that climate change Act has protected the whole political class from a great tendency for one party to score points off the other in relation to potentially unpopular measures. As long as we can maintain that consensus, I agree with the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—the former Leader of the Labour party and former Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change—that we may disagree from time to time about the means by which we achieve things, but we can still move forward satisfactorily.

The second point I want to make relates to the comments made by the right hon. Gentleman and by the other former Energy Secretary who has spoken, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). System change in the UK is required, and only through system change can mass effects be achieved. We should not expect people to take this on themselves individually as a moral crusade. Some noble souls will, but the aggregate effect will be slight compared with that of system change.

System change must work with the grain of human nature. That means, for example, that in electrifying the car fleet, which is by far the greatest current shift that we can achieve, we need to solve range anxiety. The reason that people—even those who can afford to do so, and for whom such cars represent a net saving—do not buy electric cars is that they are worried about the duration for which they will be able to travel. If we ask ourselves the crucial question, “Are you willing to have a car that might not get you home from the constituency?” the answer will always be no.

There is a ready solution: Next Green Car is already setting out plans for recharging stations every 50 miles on our trunk roads, so that no one will ever be more than 50 miles from a recharging station. We are putting a huge amount of effort, as are the car manufacturers, into improving battery storage. We can solve the problem. Sustained governmental effort is required over the succeeding 18 months or so to put us in a position where we can rival Norway, and then we will start to create a virtuous circle.

As soon as those who can already afford to do so start buying electric cars in sufficient quantities, the price will fall naturally. People who are currently less able to afford such cars will then be able to do so, after which prices will fall yet further. We will thus create exactly the sort of extraordinary revolution that we have seen in information technology with the smartphone, of which there were almost none in the world 25 years ago but of which there are now literally billions, including in many impoverished countries.

That brings me to my last point, which is about the item that has not been discussed terribly much this afternoon but will obviously need an awful lot of discussion over the next few years. There are roughly 2.6 billion people living in India and China, and they are living in circumstances that make climate change particularly significant for them. This is about not just the air pollution issues that dominate in Chinese cities, but the
extreme tensions relating to the use of water, for example, in the border lands between China and India. The regimes in both countries are very conscious of affairs. They are also conscious of the need to lift up those 2.6 billion people— in the case of China, to lift people out of middle-income status and into being rich, or what they call moderately prosperous, and in the case of India, to lift literally hundreds of millions of people who are still in abject poverty up to the condition of middle income, along with advancing the interests of those who already enjoy middle incomes. That will require a huge amount of additional activity and energy.

There is no way that anybody preaching from this House or anywhere else in the world is going to tell those countries that they do not have a right to lift their populations into that kind of prosperity. We in the west therefore have a solemn duty to spend our time trying to work out how we can make it easier and cheaper for those countries to achieve that goal, and to work with them to do it. That will require a substantial realignment of not only climate change policy, but our entire western foreign policy, which is of course too large a subject for me to dilate on now. Nevertheless, I hope that if we are to take this issue forward, we can do so with the seriousness that is required in our Foreign Office, and across the western world’s diplomatic establishments, and not just in Departments that are concerned with our domestic affairs.

4.26 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Climate change is damaging the lives of people in the UK and abroad. We see the impact through the two recent cyclones that have struck Mozambique. A country that usually expects only one major storm every 10 years has had two in two months, with the latest, Cyclone Kenneth, the strongest cyclone ever to hit Africa.

In the UK, climate change is seen as directly responsible for the projected rise in heat-related deaths and flooding, with the poorest and most vulnerable people most likely to bear the brunt. It is a tragedy that those least responsible for climate change suffer the most. We need to act to prevent a global climate disaster, yet the Government are not doing enough.

On emissions, the Government like to talk smugly about what a good job they have done, but the Committee on Climate Change warned last year that the UK will not meet the emission reduction targets laid out in the UK’s clean growth strategy for the fourth and fifth five-year carbon budgets. On biodiversity, too, the Government are falling short, with only five of the 19 targets in the strategic plan for biodiversity set to be achieved.

The Government’s commitment to fighting climate change is enshrined in the sustainable development goals, yet according to UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development we are underperforming on 72% of the targets that are relevant to the UK, and many of those are also relevant to climate change. Take target 11.6, on reducing the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including air pollution: UK1000 found that 17.9 million NHS patients in England are registered at a GP practice in an area that exceeds the World Health Organisation annual limit for PM2.5 air pollution.

The national Government clearly do not care enough about climate change, but thankfully some of our local elected officials do: Bristol and Liverpool have pledged support for the sustainable development goals; Birmingham approved a motion on the sustainable development goals in November last year; and 59 councils, more than a third of them Labour-run, have declared a climate emergency. Although those are great initiatives, local government needs more support from central Government. Local authorities need resources to invest in better, greener infrastructure, to encourage and support more people to cycle and walk safely and to promote renewables.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She has referred to what cities and authorities throughout the UK are doing; will she join me in congratulating the Welsh Government on declaring a climate emergency, and cities such as mine, Cardiff, which is doing so much work on sustainable transport, led by Councillor Huw Thomas?

Preet Kaur Gill: I am delighted to congratulate the Welsh Government on that.

The Government have blocked onshore wind, Britain’s cheapest form of energy. According to SERA, the reintroduction of onshore wind would cut another £1.6 billion off the collective electricity bill, but rather than act, the Government have chosen to block onshore wind. Sir David Attenborough has said that climate change is humanity’s “greatest threat in thousands of years”, yet the Government keep signing up to things that they fail to deliver. I call on Members on all Benches to back Labour’s motion and take the necessary action to address this threat nationally and internationally, to protect the planet and the climate for all future generations.

4.29 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Earlier this week, I read that climate change is firmly back on the political agenda, but it has been on the agenda for decades now under different Governments. Tributes have already been paid to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who is no longer in his place, and to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who must have left the Chamber a few seconds ago. A sense of urgency has been felt across all the parties—I will come back to the word “urgency” a little bit later in my contribution.

The task of decarbonising our economy is necessary. If we go about it in the right way, which this Government are doing, we will build a better and more secure future for generations to come. As I mentioned, I have a slight problem with the wording of this motion. I do recognise the need for urgency on this matter. I prefer the word urgency to emergency, coming to this matter as I do with 25 years’ experience in the oil and gas industry. In all my time in that industry, climate change and CO2 emissions were front and centre of how we operated. As people can imagine, the word emergency in that industry has a whole different meaning. It means to drop everything and to do something now, and it is the dropping everything part of that expression that I have a problem with.

The future of our environment is, as many have said, too important for party political point scoring. It is time for deeds, not words, and this UK Government are
delivering on deeds. Those who say that the Government are doing nothing could not be more wrong, because we are leading the world in decarbonisation. I will not list the very many ways in which we are doing that, owing in part to time constraints, but also owing to the fact that many other Conservative Members have already done so.

Between 2010 and 2018, greenhouse gas emissions fell by 25%. CO₂ emissions have fallen six years in a row, the longest run of reductions on record, and last year they fell to the level they were at 130 years ago. We are achieving that without compromising on economic growth, defying the naysayers who argue that we must choose between prosperity and the planet.

The debate on decarbonising our economy as effectively as possible is a serious one, and it merits serious discussion, not grandstanding gestures such as suddenly declaring an emergency. We should be working constructively with the UK Government to build on their achievements. I therefore hope that they will take into consideration three landmark publications. One of those, as others have mentioned, is the report of the Committee on Climate Change, which is due out tomorrow and which I very much look forward to reading. The second is a recent report from the Scottish Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, on the future of the Scottish oil and gas industry, and the third is last week’s report from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on carbon capture, usage and storage.

CCUS technology will be a necessary part of any serious plan to decarbonise our economy. The St Fergus gas plant in my constituency of Banff and Buchan, which is connected by an existing pipeline to the industrial complex at Grangemouth, is also known as the Scottish cluster. It is one of five clusters currently being considered for Government investment, which should be operational by the mid-2020s. In north-east Scotland, we have the expertise and we have the infrastructure in old North sea oil and gas wells and pipelines that we can take advantage of. I know that the UK Government are committed to CCUS and to the development of at least two cluster sites. I agree with what Members from all parts of the House have said: there is space for more ambition. Today, I am calling on the UK Government to commit to developing—or to consider developing—at least three CCUS clusters, to be operational by the mid-2020s, including, of course, the one in north-east Scotland.

The necessary investment will be outweighed many times over by the economic benefits of being a world leader in CCUS technology exports, by allowing heavy industry to continue in a low-carbon economy, by fighting climate change and by being able to export that expertise around the world, as that expertise will be much sought after in the years to come.

This is how we deal with climate change. This is how we decarbonise our economy. It is not by shouting about an emergency, but by building on real action, on CCUS and on other projects that this UK Government are already implementing.

4.34 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In the short time I have, I want to make three simple points in support of the motion. The first is that it is essential that this House formally declares an environment and climate emergency. I listened to the Environment Secretary, and I do not believe that he formally committed the Government to doing so, but he did recognise that the situation that we face is an emergency. By contrast to what the Minister for Energy and Climate Growth said last week. I will quote what she said, because it struck me at the time:

“...I do not see the point of saying anything unless we take action”.—[Official Report, 23 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 612.]

I do not think that she could have been more wrong, because language matters. Of course deeds must follow words, but the manner in which we define problems in turn shapes our conceptions not only of the range of possible solutions, but also of what is necessary.

We have to stop talking about climate change as though it were some benign force and start talking about what we are really confronting: an ongoing and accelerating crisis from which no one will escape and which will have profound and potentially existential consequences for everything that every one of us holds dear. That is arguably a reason that the Extinction Rebellion movement has struck a chord and it is why—at least to my mind—a degree of alarmism is entirely justified, as long as that fear acts as a clarion call to act, rather than merely provoking a sense of hopelessness. Complacency remains the greatest barrier to the response that is required. We must therefore do everything we possibly can to bring home to the public the nature of the threat we face and to build consensus for the kind of disruptive change that will inevitably have to take place as we respond to it.

My second point is that the unique situation in which we find ourselves demands a far more vigorous response than the Government have provided to date, and it demands that that response begins now. There is no doubting that there is cause for pride in the UK’s record when it comes to climate action, but it is also undeniable that the case that the reductions achieved over recent years are largely the result of having picked the low-hanging fruit, that our annual rate of emissions reduction is slowing and that we are not on track to meet our binding emissions targets.

Where, then, is the commitment from the Government to bold policies of the kind that would drive deep decarbonisation across the whole economy and get us back on track? Given all that we know—the fact that the Paris pledges will still amount to 2.7 °C of warming and that we are not on track to meet those pledges—our collective response cannot simply be business as usual. Legislating for net zero emissions by 2050 should be the absolute minimum that we are aiming for, and it should spur a far more ambitious policy agenda.

My third and final point is that the institutions of government as they are currently organised are simply not set up for the scale and pace of the transition required to avert catastrophic climate breakdown. The abolition of the Department of Energy and Climate Change three years ago was a serious mistake, but it was also emblematic of a more deep-seated failure on the part of the Government to accord emissions reduction the status it requires. When I was a member of the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change, I remember repeatedly pressing the then Secretary of State on the inadequacies of the clean growth inter-ministerial group, but at least a body of that kind existed at that time; it does not now. If the Government were really serious about this crisis, their response would
be driven relentlessly from the centre, with the institutional architecture put in place to co-ordinate and drive progress across all Departments, with emissions reduction woven throughout Government policy; it is not.

In all likelihood, we have probably already squandered the opportunity to avert an unprecedented degree of warming, but what we do in the coming 10 to 15 years will determine whether we avert even more drastic change and the suffering that will surely define a world where emissions continue to rise unabated. We must declare an environment and climate emergency, act in a way that is commensurate with such an emergency and reform the machinery of government so that we are able to drive forward this agenda. That is why I will wholeheartedly support the motion this evening.

4.38 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I agree with him that the architecture of government needs to change to reflect the dire urgency of the issue. I want to ensure that any changes that this or any future Government make are not just about moving the deckchairs on the Titanic, but that they are actually part of a coherent strategy that goes through every single Department and every agency, and that that urgency is reflected in them.

I commend the Opposition for what is, I think, a perfectly reasonable motion. I would have improved on it—it could have been a little more congratulatory—but essentially it is a quite a mature bit of opposition. However, I want to reflect for a moment on what the Government, and there I met the leaders of island states who are buying leaseholds on other islands because theirs are practically uninhabitable. The land where they have grown the food on which they depend is lost, and the suffering that will surely define a world where warming, but what we do in the coming 10 to 15 years will determine whether we avert even more drastic change and the suffering that will surely define a world where emissions continue to rise unabated. We must declare an environment and climate emergency, act in a way that is commensurate with such an emergency and reform the machinery of government so that we are able to drive forward this agenda. That is why I will wholeheartedly support the motion this evening.

4.38 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I agree with him that the architecture of government needs to change to reflect the dire urgency of the issue. I want to ensure that any changes that this or any future Government make are not just about moving the deckchairs on the Titanic, but that they are actually part of a coherent strategy that goes through every single Department and every agency, and that that urgency is reflected in them.

I commend the Opposition for what is, I think, a perfectly reasonable motion. I would have improved on it—it could have been a little more congratulatory—but essentially it is a quite a mature bit of opposition. However, I want to reflect for a moment on what the Government, and there I met the leaders of island states who are buying leaseholds on other islands because theirs are practically uninhabitable. The land where they have grown the food on which they depend is lost, and the suffering that will surely define a world where warming, but what we do in the coming 10 to 15 years will determine whether we avert even more drastic change and the suffering that will surely define a world where emissions continue to rise unabated. We must declare an environment and climate emergency, act in a way that is commensurate with such an emergency and reform the machinery of government so that we are able to drive forward this agenda. That is why I will wholeheartedly support the motion this evening.

4.38 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I agree with him that the architecture of government needs to change to reflect the dire urgency of the issue. I want to ensure that any changes that this or any future Government make are not just about moving the deckchairs on the Titanic, but that they are actually part of a coherent strategy that goes through every single Department and every agency, and that that urgency is reflected in them.

I commend the Opposition for what is, I think, a perfectly reasonable motion. I would have improved on it—it could have been a little more congratulatory—but essentially it is a quite a mature bit of opposition. However, I want to reflect for a moment on what the Government, and there I met the leaders of island states who are buying leaseholds on other islands because theirs are practically uninhabitable. The land where they have grown the food on which they depend is lost, and the suffering that will surely define a world where warming, but what we do in the coming 10 to 15 years will determine whether we avert even more drastic change and the suffering that will surely define a world where emissions continue to rise unabated. We must declare an environment and climate emergency, act in a way that is commensurate with such an emergency and reform the machinery of government so that we are able to drive forward this agenda. That is why I will wholeheartedly support the motion this evening.

4.38 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I agree with him that the architecture of government needs to change to reflect the dire urgency of the issue. I want to ensure that any changes that this or any future Government make are not just about moving the deckchairs on the Titanic, but that they are actually part of a coherent strategy that goes through every single Department and every agency, and that that urgency is reflected in them.

I commend the Opposition for what is, I think, a perfectly reasonable motion. I would have improved on it—it could have been a little more congratulatory—but essentially it is a quite a mature bit of opposition. However, I want to reflect for a moment on what the Government, and there I met the leaders of island states who are buying leaseholds on other islands because theirs are practically uninhabitable. The land where they have grown the food on which they depend is lost, and the suffering that will surely define a world where warming, but what we do in the coming 10 to 15 years will determine whether we avert even more drastic change and the suffering that will surely define a world where emissions continue to rise unabated. We must declare an environment and climate emergency, act in a way that is commensurate with such an emergency and reform the machinery of government so that we are able to drive forward this agenda. That is why I will wholeheartedly support the motion this evening.

4.38 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I agree with him that the architecture of government needs to change to reflect the dire urgency of the issue. I want to ensure that any changes that this or any future Government make are not just about moving the deckchairs on the Titanic, but that they are actually part of a coherent strategy that goes through every single Department and every agency, and that that urgency is reflected in them.

I commend the Opposition for what is, I think, a perfectly reasonable motion. I would have improved on it—it could have been a little more congratulatory—but essentially it is a quite a mature bit of opposition. However, I want to reflect for a moment on what the Government, and there I met the leaders of island states who are buying leaseholds on other islands because theirs are practically uninhabitable. The land where they have grown the food on which they depend is lost, and the suffering that will surely define a world where warming, but what we do in the coming 10 to 15 years will determine whether we avert even more drastic change and the suffering that will surely define a world where emissions continue to rise unabated. We must declare an environment and climate emergency, act in a way that is commensurate with such an emergency and reform the machinery of government so that we are able to drive forward this agenda. That is why I will wholeheartedly support the motion this evening.

4.38 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I agree with him that the architecture of government needs to change to reflect the dire urgency of the issue. I want to ensure that any changes that this or any future Government make are not just about moving the deckchairs on the Titanic, but that they are actually part of a coherent strategy that goes through every single Department and every agency, and that that urgency is reflected in them.

I commend the Opposition for what is, I think, a perfectly reasonable motion. I would have improved on it—it could have been a little more congratulatory—but essentially it is a quite a mature bit of opposition. However, I want to reflect for a moment on what the Government, and there I met the leaders of island states who are buying leaseholds on other islands because theirs are practically uninhabitable. The land where they have grown the food on which they depend is lost, and the suffering that will surely define a world where warming, but what we do in the coming 10 to 15 years will determine whether we avert even more drastic change and the suffering that will surely define a world where emissions continue to rise unabated. We must declare an environment and climate emergency, act in a way that is commensurate with such an emergency and reform the machinery of government so that we are able to drive forward this agenda. That is why I will wholeheartedly support the motion this evening.

4.38 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I agree with him that the architecture of government needs to change to reflect the dire urgency of the issue. I want to ensure that any changes that this or any future Government make are not just about moving the deckchairs on the Titanic, but that they are actually part of a coherent strategy that goes through every single Department and every agency, and that that urgency is reflected in them.

I commend the Opposition for what is, I think, a perfectly reasonable motion. I would have improved on it—it could have been a little more congratulatory—but essentially it is a quite a mature bit of opposition. However, I want to reflect for a moment on what the Government, and there I met the leaders of island states who are buying leaseholds on other islands because theirs are practically uninhabitable. The land where they have grown the food on which they depend is lost, and the suffering that will surely define a world where warming, but what we do in the coming 10 to 15 years will determine whether we avert even more drastic change and the suffering that will surely define a world where emissions continue to rise unabated. We must declare an environment and climate emergency, act in a way that is commensurate with such an emergency and reform the machinery of government so that we are able to drive forward this agenda. That is why I will wholeheartedly support the motion this evening.
by the Government, including to transform our economy.
Our current economic system threatens the foundations
on which human wellbeing depends. Building a sustainable
economy needs a fundamental rethink of the way we
run and measure its success, so that GDP, which takes
no account of environmental impact or human wellbeing,
is no longer the only benchmark. We need to adapt how
we produce goods and services to reflect natural constraints.

As the party of workers, Labour is unequivocal that
the required shift to a net zero-emissions economy must
be fair for communities and workers. What we need is
nothing short of a green industrial revolution, which
will allow us to develop jobs and investment opportunities
across the UK, such as the 50,000 well-paid, unionised
jobs that Labour would create in Scotland.

It is clear that the demand for change from our young
people and campaigners is not about business as usual,
with bold words but bland action tinkering around the
edges. They are explicit that this is about ensuring that
actions are transformational, addressing the systemic
drivers of environmental degradation and climate change.
Labour is committed to doing that. My constituents in
Midlothian are extremely concerned about not only
climate change but the environmental crisis. Scotland’s
rivers, including my local River Esk, are being frequently
polluted, and it is awful to see.

I will sum up with the words of my constituent, who
wrote to me recently to say:

“Current legislation appears to be serving companies; it is
serving ‘convenience’, which translates into suffering, poisoning
and harm for wildlife and ecosystems, and it is serving profits and
the economy.”

We must create a system that is for the people, for the
planet and for the many.

4.47 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It has been a pleasure to sit in the Chamber for this debate,
and I am really pleased about the consensus across the
House today. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion
(Caroline Lucas) must have had a heart attack when I
signed her early-day motion on 13 March, which called
for a UK-wide climate emergency. I did so because I
passionately believe in the need for that. My daughter was
home from Australia. She is a marine biologist, and
she told me in no uncertain terms what daddy should
do. She is 30 years of age, and I often listen to her. I

4.50 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): We need our
environment, and the environment needs us to care for
it. In the last week, we have had powerful reminders from Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion that the
time to take decisive action on climate change is now.
Scientists project that in 12 years it could be too late to prevent levels of pollution from causing irreversible
damage to our planet and, indeed, our society.

I will focus particularly on air quality, as it is about
this issue that I have mostly been contacted by my
constituents. The concentration of nitrogen dioxide in
the air in my constituency is falling, but in many areas it
still exceeds the legal limits put in place to protect us.
There are 453 London primary and secondary schools
in areas that exceed legal air quality limits. I have
recently spoken about improving air quality at Heath
House school in my constituency, and to children at Torridon Primary School, who have written beautiful
letters to me about climate change. Children are clearly
leading the way on this, which is to the credit of our
schools and our teachers. It is time we took notice, time
we paid attention and time we took action.

The busy South Circular Road runs through my
constituency, and many will know of the tragic death of Ella Kissi-Debrah, which has been linked to spikes in
nitrogen dioxide in that polluted hotspot. I want to take
this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of her
mother, Rosamund, who works tirelessly to campaign
to improve air quality. I am delighted that the Mayor of
London has taken action to tackle the problem in
London, including with the ultra-low emission zone
and low-emission bus zones. ULEZ will improve air
quality, and by 2025 no primary or secondary schools
will be in areas exceeding legal air quality limits, while
the gap in air quality between high and low-income
areas of London will be reduced by 71%.

We must live more sustainably. We need transformative
action, and it is important that we do this. I urge the
Government to recognise the scale of the problem, to
declare a climate emergency and to begin legislation for
a net zero emission target as soon as possible.
4.53 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): First, I congratulate my constituent Maddie Evans from St George’s School, Harpenden, who has managed to make it out of school to come to this debate. I think she is somewhere up in the Gallery, or at least I was told she was. I congratulate her on that, and I hope she will not get into trouble for doing so. [Interruption.] Let us move on.

I do not want to repeat what has already been said in this debate, but it is important that we recognise that no party has a monopoly on virtue on this subject, and most of the speeches so far in the debate have made that clear. There are some things to celebrate: 2018 was a record year for renewable energy, and CO₂ emissions have reduced year on year in every year of the life of this Government. This is the Government who banned microbeads and who have reduced plastic bag usage by over 85%. It is also the Government who support nuclear power, which helps us in our overall aims in this area.

However, I was very taken by the excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). He talked compellingly about the act of political persuasion. We need to take our constituents with us on this journey; people from “planet politics” should not be telling them how they should be taxed more or have their cars taken away. We have to take our constituents with us. How do we do that? We need to show them that their lives can be better and richer—their lives can change, and that is what we need to do.

I thought I would give some examples of what we are doing in Hitchin and Harpenden. We are installing many more electric car charging points. We are improving our cycle routes, such as the Nickey line, which connects the village of Redbourn with Harpenden. That not only reduces car usage, but makes people fitter and happier through cycling. We are protecting our chalk streams such as the River Mimram. Heartwood forest, a new forest of almost 1,000 hectares, is just north of the village of Sandridge in my constituency and protects biodiversity in Hertfordshire.

I am listing all those things not only because I am a very proud constituency MP but to say that if we can show people how their day-to-day lives can be better and richer as a result of taking into account the climate emergency that we are declaring today, we can persuade our electorate to change their lives and not be dominated by their cars, their gas or their oil. We can persuade them to make the larger, more systemic changes that I think we all realise we need to see.

4.56 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I am relieved and pleased that today my party is urging the Government to see the situation as the emergency it is. I am delighted that we have so many millions—indeed, billions—in south-east Asia, such as the Mekong and the threats to rice production, which feeds many millions—indeed, billions—in south-east Asia, or when we look at the low-lying fields of the Mekong and the threats to rice production, which feeds so many millions—indeed, billions—in south-east Asia, or when we look at the south-east of China and see where the threats appear. For example, when we look at the low-lying fields of the Mekong and the threats to rice production, which feeds so many millions—indeed, billions—in south-east Asia, we should not be saying to them that we are not serious about the protests, the school strikes and the young people who have forced the climate emergency on to the news agenda. At a time when only one issue has been completely dominating all our agendas in this place, those protestors have forced us to notice that, while we have been distracted elsewhere, our planet is breaking down.

The devastating impacts of the warming of the planet cannot possibly now be ignored. Food production, agriculture, our oceans and wildlife and the very air that we breathe are all of course vital to sustaining life on earth itself. We are denying ourselves and future generations the most beautiful treasures that our planet has to offer, such as our coral reefs, which we have allowed to be all but entirely destroyed. Our greed and desire for instant, throwaway products that float out to sea, destroying the ocean wildlife, has got to change. We need to let go of our dependency on the quickest, fastest and easiest and learn to reuse and recycle as part of our everyday lives.

In my constituency, air pollution is a very serious concern. Despite that, our council has inadequate and outdated air monitoring equipment that, according to local experts, is unfit for purpose. One such expert is Professor Stephen Peckham, director of the Centre for Health Services Studies at the University of Kent. He set up Canterbury Clean Air, of which I am proud to have been a founding member, a few years ago. Together, the group used more suitable monitors, which could measure particulates such as PM₂.₅. The levels recorded were much higher than those recommended by the World Health Organisation. The levels of NO₂ and ozone, or O₃, also regularly exceed national hourly limits. According to Professor Peckham and his team, those pollutants cause significant health problems, especially among children, whose lungs become stunted.

I join my colleagues across the House to urge the Government to see the situation as the emergency it is and allow us to tackle climate change urgently.

4.59 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. I am delighted to see my right hon. Friend and neighbour the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the Front Bench; he will remember when we cycled up the A21 together.

The local infrastructure starting to emerge in west Kent is extremely impressive, and the work done by our local councils in greening the areas where we live is fantastic. This is not just a domestic debate, however. In fact, it is particularly not a domestic debate. As we declare a climate change emergency today, it is essential that we remember that. Privileged as I am to chair the Foreign Affairs Committee, it is important to look around the world and see where the threats appear. For example, when we look at the low-lying fields of the Mekong and the threats to rice production, which feeds so many millions—indeed, billions—in south-east Asia, or when we look at the south-east of China and see many intensively inhabited areas of that country at threat, it is important that we talk about this question not just for ourselves but for the whole world.

Many Members will have heard me being critical of one aspect of China this morning, so they will perhaps forgive me if I reflect on a different aspect. China’s work on reforestation and changing and reversing the
desertification of many areas of land is inspiring. What that country has done to promote better green policies in certain areas is in many ways an example to all of us from which we need to draw very important lessons. The threats we see are not just problems for south-east Asia; they affect us here in the west. For example, when we look at some of the triggers—I do not mean all—all of the Syrian civil war, which has led to mass migration and very severe political repercussions in Europe, it is impossible not to look at the challenges of climate change in that country and the impact they have had on farmers. Talking about the rise of al-Shabaab in the Maghreb and the Sahel without talking about climate change is just impossible.

As we talk today about climate change, we are talking fundamentally not just about the environmental security of our homes and the dreadful curse of fly-tipping poisoning some of our waterways, which we see in west Kent and, sadly, probably in other areas too, but about how we structure a world to deal with the inability to address those threats unless we reverse some of the impacts of climate change. I welcome this debate very much and I agree that this is an emergency.

5.2 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on her excellent, compassionate and warm maiden speech. I feel I have been very lucky over the years with my constituency neighbours, and I am absolutely delighted not to be the only woman ever elected to Gwent any longer.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak up for the many constituents who have contacted me urging support for the motion, which calls for this House to declare an environmental and climate emergency. In fact, the Welsh Labour Government did just that yesterday. I hope we do so today to instil the urgency that is crucially needed. Climate change is wreaking havoc on our wildlife and our habitats, and is putting lives and homes at risk around the world, with the poorest in the world bearing the brunt. Last year was the fourth hottest year on record, and our UK summer was declared by the Met Office to be the joint hottest since records began. As the motion acknowledges, we need an urgent, rapid and large-scale response by the UK Government and, of course, by Governments around the world. Incremental change is not enough.

In Wales, we have been ambitious for the actions set out in “A low carbon Wales”, the first statutory decarbonisation plan. It contains 100 policies and proposals across all sectors of our economy to drive down emissions in Wales. We were one of the first nations in the world to make sustainable development a constitutional duty. We have consistently supported and promoted renewable energy generation; put a planning moratorium on fracking; and supported the development of tidal lagoons. In Wales, we recycle more than anywhere else in the UK and are in touching distance of being the world’s top recycling nation.

We cannot do this alone, however. We need the UK Government to deliver on the areas that are not devolved. The UK may have been a global leader on climate change, but the task is getting much tougher. Onshore wind deployment has fallen by 94% and offshore wind cannot plug the gap. We have removed support for solar and have failed to deliver on the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, which would have had huge potential for Newport too. Those are lost opportunities to reduce carbon emissions and to build the green jobs and economy of the future, of which Wales could be a key part.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which runs the Newport Wetlands reserve in my constituency, highlighted last week that the loss of species including pollinating insects, the destruction of habitats and damage to ecosystems pose as great a threat as climate change. This debate centres on the impact of humans on the natural environment, and there are difficult choices to make, not least in my corner of Wales, on road building and the challenges of looking after workers and communities reliant on carbon-intensive sectors.

This week I received a huge bundle of letters from year 5 and 6 pupils from Major Church in Wales Primary School, as part of their campaign on plastics. One young pupil, Katie, said in her letter:

“...I want to help but I can’t do it on my own.”

I think that echoes the views of many young people calling for action to protect the planet. We should harness the passion of young activists such as my constituents, to protect their future.

5.5 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Like many colleagues from across the House, I agree that we are in a climate emergency and should act accordingly. Somerset County Council and other councils around the south-west have already taken the lead on this, and I am glad that other councils, and hopefully the Government, will follow suit.

The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) gave a very good speech earlier on the responsibility that we in this place have for leadership, honesty and persuasion over the challenge that lies in front of us. It reminded me of a TV series that I am sure many colleagues will have gorged on: “The West Wing”. There is an episode around 10-word answers, and “This is a climate emergency and we must act now” is a 10-word answer. That is the easy bit; we can all say that and mean it and genuinely want to do something about it. However, the bit that comes next is hugely challenging, and that is where we have to start having conversations with our constituents.

The shadow Business Secretary has some great ideas on this, but at the weekend I saw her on television talking about subsidies for fossil fuels. Referring to the EU’s accounting of it, she meant things such as the 5% VAT on heating fuel and the forgone taxation from the refusal to implement the motoring fuel escalator. To say those are subsidies for fossil fuels is fine—we have to tackle those issues; we use fossil fuels too much for heating and transport—but let us not pretend by using the line “subsidies for fossil fuels” that there are not enormous challenges about which we must be honest with our constituents.

From that comes the whole issue of boiler and car scrappage, and how we do that in a socially just way, because invariably those least able to replace their boilers or cars are the ones driving the most polluting cars or using the least efficient boilers. It is a hugely difficult challenge, about which we must have an honest discussion, as we must on the requirement to bring about carbon
capture and storage or to look at hydrogen as a means for allowing our heavy industry to continue. We have to be honest about the costs of doing that, but also about the advantages.

Time prohibits me from going through a whole list of things that I think we—as a Parliament, across the House—can lead on. We can sell a vision of a life that is better, more comfortable and more sustainable, but we will not do it if we jump on easy-to-grab soundbites such as “subsidies on fossil fuels”, and then pretend that to eradicate those subsidies would not bring a profound challenge to our cost of living. The challenge is enormous. We must stand together.

5.8 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the thoughtful speech from the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey). I begin by congratulating the newest Member of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), on her maiden speech.

Moving on to the subject matter, the science is absolutely clear: the climate is warming and the global mean temperature is rising, enhanced by human activity. The protesters I met last week said that, the young people I meet daily in my constituency tell me that and my family tell me that. We need to act. I received a thoughtful letter and petition from students at Ysgol David Hughes comprehensive school in my constituency, who went on strike. Our young people get it.

To be fair, my local authority is a leader in the United Kingdom on recycling, the Welsh Government have a good record on recycling and Surfers Against Sewage declared the isle of Anglesey a plastic-free county. I am proud of our local record.

I say this to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy because it is important—and I worked with him when he was in opposition and our party was in Government, and I give him credit for his consistency: Wales spends twice as much on energy efficiency measures as the UK Government, and Scotland spends even more. Northern Ireland, which does not even have a sitting Government, spends one and half times more than the UK Government. These are important matters to highlight, because we are going backwards, and England is the largest of the four nations of the United Kingdom. We need to do more. I understand the point about austerity, but all parts of the UK—local authorities and the nations’ Administrations—have had to deal with austerity as well. We need to concentrate.

We built a consensus in the House around the Climate Change Act, and I was proud to be a part of that. We were world leaders. We now need to reset the energy button, which is why I want to concentrate on power. We need to invest in our natural resources more. Subsidy is not a dirty word. All technologies in this country were once subsidised. Oil and gas were 100% subsidised. The Secretary of State will know what I am going to say: we need to invest more in tidal and wave energy. It is so predictable. We need to do it now. First-of-its-kind technology will be very expensive, but if we do not do it, we will be back here in years to come saying, “We just about missed out target”. We could meet our target with a proper funding system for large energy infrastructure projects. I will work with him to ensure that happens.

We should consider the Welsh Water not-for-profit model. It puts customers first and our environment first. We in the House must follow suit.

5.11 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): On Friday, the RSPB launched its “Let Nature Sing” track and accompanying video, which we should promote as much as we can. The track brings attention to the fact that we have 40 million fewer birds today and reminds us of birdsong. It is a call to action. We can add to that the loss of pollinating insects, the destruction of habitats and the 1 million species under threat. These problems alone are reason enough to declare a climate emergency, and I am glad to be speaking in this debate.

The Government must commit to and grow a low-carbon economy. The country wants us to accelerate action and lead the world. I want briefly to mention the sustainable development goals. They have not been mentioned yet, but they include clear commitments to helping the world’s poorest countries address climate change, and there are things that we, as a global leader, can do.

At home, there are things we must do. Getting it right will reduce the demand on the NHS; create and spread wealth across all corners of the UK, which is of particular interest to Cornwall; reduce demand on energy supply; provide warm and comfortable homes, as the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) made clear; support small businesses and create skilled workforces, especially in construction and the renewables sector; boost the car manufacturing industry and innovation in greener fuels; and support sustainable food production.

Practical measures are needed. Cornwall Council is one of the first councils, if not the first, to commit to being carbon-free by 2030. We are talking about funding and accelerating the work to address fuel poor homes; launching a car scrappage scheme to support poorer families to move to more fuel efficient vehicles; and increasing support such as that provided by Salix Finance, which provides 100% interest-free loans to public buildings, including schools, so that they can put renewable solutions on their roofs and reap the benefits once the loans are repaid.

We are also calling for the introduction of the environment Bill, which the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), assured me in a recent debate will happen immediately after the next Queen’s Speech. In that Bill, we must establish the nature recovery network, invest in woodland recovery and incentivise landowners to adopt nature-friendly practices. Finally, people in Cornwall are calling for citizens’ assemblies to be established to identify solutions both nationally and locally and give people a stake in how this country moves forward.

The Government must take a lead. Councils such as the Duchy of Cornwall want to get on top of this agenda, conquer this and be a force for good, but they need Government policy and funds to allow them to do it.

5.14 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): So often as politicians we talk about what is politically possible, but with the climate crisis we need to move from the art of the
politically possible to the science of what is necessary. When you are drowning, you do not ask yourself, “Ooh, what is politically possible?”; you do whatever it takes to survive. When the banks crashed in 2008, the political consensus in this place was to save them by any means necessary. According to the National Audit Office, the cost was £1.2 trillion, which meant 10 years of austerity, public service cuts and vast human suffering. But now, instead of a banking collapse, we face a climate and ecological collapse. We face catastrophes of biblical proportions: droughts, pestilence, famine, floods, wildfires, mass migration, political instability, war and terrorism. Global civilisation as we know it will be gone by the end of the century unless we act.

What has been the response from the Conservatives? I will try not to be too partisan. We have seen the green light for fracking, fossil fuel subsidies boosted by billions, onshore wind scrapped, solar support axed, the green homes scheme eviscerated, zero-carbon homes abandoned, the green bank sold off, the Swansea tidal lagoon stuffed, and Heathrow approved. If Tory environmental policy in 2010 could be summed-up as “hug a husky”, the 2019 policy looks more like “Shoot it, skin it, and boil it down to its bones.”

It was against that background—for the science of the climate crisis over here and Government policy over there—that Greta Thunberg, the youth strikers and Extinction Rebellion appeared. They arrived at the climate crisis debate like gatecrashers at a premature funeral, smashing through the window in a shower of glass to announce to a hushed congregation that the patient was still alive. Their message to this place is simple: “The time for incrementalism has passed. Act now, change now, or be swept away by those who will.”

This motion offers us a chance to fundamentally restructure our economy to deliver good, secure, well-paid jobs as we mobilise to decarbonise our economy on a grand scale. It offers us a chance to reinvigorate and strengthen our democracy, to massively reduce social and economic inequalities, and to protect and restore vital threatened habitats and carbon sinks. We must go global financial system, bringing it back under democratic control.

That brings me to my final point. Navigating global society through the perils of the 21st century will require two key things: global co-operation, and human ingenuity and passion on a scale hitherto unseen in our entire history. President Kennedy summed it up in his moon-shot speech of 1962. He did not ask what it would cost; he asked instead what it would take to succeed. He said:

“We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win”.

5.17 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): It will come as no surprise to anyone in the House that I shall advocate nuclear as the most game-changing, transformative way in which to tackle the climate problem and significantly—seriously—reduce our carbon emissions. There is, quite simply, no alternative. Nuclear is unparalleled. It is safe, proven and efficient technology. Its capability to generate clean energy 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for 60 years is incredible.

Rolling out the Government’s third-generation nuclear reactors would generate more than 18 GW of clean, safe, low-carbon energy, while also creating thousands of jobs, apprenticeships and training places and improving local communities. I speak with some experience, having lived in a nuclear community for 43 years and having worked in the industry. Because the last Labour Government failed to invest in new nuclear, the last power station to be built was Sizewell B. Our current power stations are coming to the end of their long-serving lives, which means that our carbon emissions will soar, as they have in Germany and Japan. If Germany had invested the same amount that it invested in renewables—$580 billion—in nuclear, it would now have zero carbon emissions.

This Conservative Government are rightly shouting loudly and proudly, having celebrated 90 of the cleanest hours last Easter, and 2018 was the cleanest, greenest year ever in the United Kingdom. Renewables are great, but they are geographically limiting, and intermittent by their very nature. Last June, wind turbines were operating at only 4% of their potential. This Government are the first to take decarbonisation seriously, with Hinkley Point C now under construction. I welcome with great anticipation the small modular reactor competition, the UK consortium, and advanced modular reactors, which will enable us to reduce waste in the industry. I also welcome the energy White Paper and the regulated asset-based financial model, which I very much hope will ensure that we can reduce the cost of new nuclear as well.

The Leader of the Opposition has consistently argued against nuclear power. He voted against Sizewell B and against Hinkley Point C; he has campaigned against nuclear his entire working life.

The evidence is clear: denuclearisation increases carbon emissions. Countries around the world are now realising this, and I know this Government are taking decarbonisation seriously.

5.20 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The climate change debate has moved on rapidly in recent months, and let us all agree on one thing: we are no longer here to debate whether this problem is happening. Look at what is happening to our planet: from the scorching hot week we had in February this year to the blistering hot summer last year, our climate is changing even in the UK before our very eyes, but while these ice-lolly weather patterns might be a gift to some of us in the western world with some capacity to adapt, the price we pay for them as a planet is catastrophic. We see what is happening to our climate in the UK and its effects, namely extreme weather, both hot and cold, of increasing frequency, but we must always remember that our country is predicted by climate scientists to be one of the least affected by global climate change.

In 2019, when we think about and debate climate change action it is not enough simply to coo over David Attenborough and give ourselves a pat on the back for shining a light on what is happening to our world; as other Members have said, we must act and we must act now. This is the biggest issue humanity has ever faced, and it requires us to be bold and to do much more than just speak out. Indeed, Greta Thunberg put this better than I or any other Member could:

“To do your best is no longer good enough. We must all do the seemingly impossible.”
[Chris Elmore]

But what can we do? Well, for a start, we must support today’s motion, which is about acting decisively to lead the way and being a catalyst for change both here in the UK and internationally. The magnitude of this issue demands cross-party consensus and it demands that we act swiftly. Taking this first step today must be the start of us taking the right path at this most precarious of crossroads.

I cannot speak out in this debate without putting on record how deeply disappointed I was when on her first day in office one of the Prime Minister’s first acts was to abolish the Department of Energy and Climate Change. What message did this send to the rest of the world? It sent the message that the UK was no longer a leader on climate change, but was instead resigned to being a follower. Let us not forget that under the last Labour Government we became the first country in the world to legislate legally binding carbon budgets, in the Climate Change Act 2008.

I will conclude now, given the time limit. I want to leave hon. Members, and particularly the Government, with this point. What if the French fire service had known about last month’s fire at Notre Dame 10 years before it happened? What if we had known about any of the terrorist atrocities across the world 10 years before they happened? Just think what preventive action we would have taken if we had had that level of foresight and known about those catastrophes, and countless others, a decade ahead of them happening. With climate change we have that foresight and, crucially, the means to do something about it. The legs of the stool are there, as it were, but there is still one missing: us, and that is all it takes for this whole thing to fall over.

So when we leave this place today and go back to talking about other important matters such as no-deal cliff edges, let us all commit to remember one thing: if we think the no-deal cliff edge is scary, it is barely in the foothills of what the climate cliff edge could look like.

5.23 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It will come as no surprise to Ministers sitting on the Treasury Bench that I rise to speak about energy efficiency.

I was fortunate enough to go to two schools on Friday, Shocklach and Willow Wood, and both sets of pupils talked to me about the importance of the climate to them, but they also asked what we are doing about it—and that is what this debate is about. I am very pleased that the Government have brought forward their green growth strategy. There is so much positive action that the Government have taken, but I have to say that I do think we have made one mistake: removing the zero-carbon homes standard. It is wrong that we are now building homes that will need to be retrofitted; we have a lot of homes that need energy efficiency measures installed now, and I want to talk about some of the benefits we could deliver by introducing energy efficiency measures.

If £1 billion was put into bringing the energy performance certificate standard up to C we could save every family £270. We could put £270 back into their pockets and create approximately £51 billion-worth of revenue for the Exchequer as that programme rolled out annually. It would also save 25% of our energy consumption, which would be the equivalent of the output of six nuclear power stations the size of Hinkley Point C. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who made the case for nuclear, but I would also argue that we absolutely need to ensure that our homes are energy efficient—not only because of the savings in electricity generation, but because the CO₂ and carbon savings are estimated at about £34 billion-worth of cost and the air quality improvements are estimated at about £4.1 billion of cost.

An excellent document has been prepared by the Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group and I urge the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to encourage the Chancellor to put that document into his red box to read before the spending review. We have seen how Germany has harnessed low-interest loans to generate £8.4 billion-worth of home improvements by homeowners that were virtually paid for by the VAT receipts on those sales. That was a self-financing project, which is one way to help to tackle this problem.

5.26 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): We are 10 years away from the edge of the biggest crisis that humanity will ever face. No ifs, no buts—if this is left unchecked, it will happen in our lifetime. The actions that we take tonight, tomorrow and in the coming days and weeks—and, crucially, over the next decade—will determine the course of history.

What have we already seen? What is coming to us if we do not act? We have seen the melting of global ice stores, shifting seasons and migration patterns, extreme weather—we have certainly seen that already in the UK—and droughts, not only in developing countries but across the world. We have also seen wildfires, as my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) said, and the degradation of our coral reefs, many of which have been lost forever. We see rising food prices hitting the poorest hardest, and we see deforestation not just by humans but by invasive species that thrive in warmer temperatures. That is our backdrop. The question today is not whether we should act; it is, what on earth can we do to act quickly enough to reverse some of the damage we have already done and prevent the damage that we could inflict in the future?

This is fundamentally an issue of global justice. Climate change is already hitting the poorest hardest, and as we help them to rebuild and develop their communities, we must avoid prescribing for them the old models of growth that have led us to this situation. Instead, we must promote new, sustainable development models. That is why we on this side of the House are committed to stopping aid spending on fossil fuels, and I hope that the Government will meet us in that commitment.

I want to speak briefly about protests. To those who joke and laugh at the millions of schoolchildren and street protesters taking part in climate strikes, and who brand them truants or virtue signallers, I say this: “You are on the wrong side of history, and we will act without you.” Let them look at this debate today and see how well subscribed it is. The protesters have clearly got our attention.

So what comes next? We must support today’s motion and become the first country in the world to declare a climate emergency, but we must also have radical change in our economy after that. In our energy system,
our transport, our agriculture, our waste processing and everything in between, we must put forward the following test: is this short-term gain going to result in long-term harm? Would our children pass that test? Of course it would not. These questions must also be asked by international Governments and by our local government. I am proud that Labour colleagues going into the local elections have committed to making Nottingham carbon zero by 2028. That is on the ballot paper in our local elections. The Government should help to meet that energy target by electrifying our trains. It is absolutely absurd that we are buying new trains that will be carbon emitters.

The question we have to ask ourselves is, do we want to be the generation that had the greatest knowledge of what we are doing to our world but chose to do nothing? Surely not. We have been debating this issue for nearly four hours and I have not heard a dissenting voice, so it looks as though we are going to declare the emergency today, but tomorrow we have to act.

5.29 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Britain has a good record in recognising the global threat of climate change and taking steps to address it. That said, the threat of climate change is growing, and more action is required on more fronts. Tomorrow, the Committee on Climate Change will provide its recommendations for how to shift the UK’s long-term climate target to net zero emission by 2050, and I anticipate that the Government will respond positively and proactively. That will complement the measures already being taken, which embed tackling climate change in the nation’s DNA.

The industrial strategy leads into the clean growth strategy, from which sector deals are derived. The offshore wind sector deal, which the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth launched in Lowestoft in March, is helping to revitalise the local economy, and ScottishPower has set up its operations and maintenance base in the dock. Also, an offshore engineering training facility is under construction at East Coast College.

The low-carbon economy offers enormous opportunities to grow our domestic economy and to create expertise that we can export around the world. Oil and gas extraction on the UK continental shelf has played a crucial role in the UK and East Anglian economies for over 50 years, and the industry has an important role to play in the transition to a low-carbon economy. The skills and expertise required in the sector overlap to a large degree with those required in offshore renewables.

The two industries are already working together on such innovative projects as gas-to-wire, whereby gas from the southern North sea gas fields is generated into electricity offshore and then transmitted to the shore.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend welcome the £355 million that has been invested in Scotland’s offshore wind industry by the UK Government between 2010 and 2018?

Peter Aldous: I do welcome that investment. The two industries go hand in hand. In oil and gas basins all around the world, one will hear Scottish, Geordie and North Sea voices. They are connected and the message is that continues to be the case long after we have extracted the last drop of oil from the North sea and after other countries have moved to forms of renewable energy production.

We need to look closely at what we can do better in many areas, and I will briefly mention four of them. First, the Suffolk coast has been at the forefront of the battle with rising sea levels for a millennium, and the challenge has intensified over the past decade as climate accelerated the rise in the level of the North sea. Innovative schemes have been produced locally to defend both Lowestoft and Kessingland, and it is vital that they are properly funded. Secondly, the roll-out of smart meters is in many respects the elephant in the room that no one talks about. We are not doing well enough, and we need to do better. Thirdly, we were wrong to ditch the zero-carbon homes initiative. It needs to be reinstated, and we must step up plans to retrofit our existing housing stock, thereby reducing fuel poverty. Finally, electricity storage has a vital role to play, but it is threatened by Ofgem’s targeted charging review proposals. They must be reviewed, with full implementation delayed until 2023.

Millions of people around the world are imperilled by climate change day to day. We need more of what we are already doing, but on more fronts and with a greater sense of urgency.

5.33 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The failure to act with sufficient ambition to avert the climate catastrophe will be the greatest moral failure of our time. The industrial world’s destruction of our planet is essential to the story of a single lifetime. The planet has been brought from seeming stability to the brink of catastrophe in my lifetime, so we have to turn things around in our lifetimes, too. It is the most awesome responsibility, but it is also the most amazing opportunity.

When people look back at this moment, it will not be those blockading bridges or going on strike from school that history will judge severely. It will be those who shut their eyes and blocked their ears to the scale of the challenge. I pay tribute to the work of Extinction Rebellion and the youth climate strikes, because they have already made a difference. The sheer number of people in the Chamber today is testament to that.

We need to be serious. Declaring a climate emergency should not be a few words before we move on with business as usual. Business as usual is climate appeasement. We need change. We need the kind of change we have when we face, for example, conflict or war. We need that kind of single-minded mobilisation, because extraordinary things can happen at extraordinary times. Back in 1938 and for the six years that followed, at that wartime moment, we reduced our use of coal by 25%, we reduced our use of private cars by 95% and public transport use went up by 13% because we had a shared sense of emergency. My plea for today is that we do not just use these words about emergency but that we should be serious and act on them.

Conservative Members sometimes challenge me to say that they have done better and to congratulate the Government on their actions, but it is hard to do that when, for example, the Secretary of State refused to answer my question about aviation expansion. The bottom line is that we cannot be serious about a climate emergency and continue with aviation expansion, Heathrow expansion and fracking. The Government have slashed zero-carbon homes, shafted solar power and banned onshore wind, which is wrong. We need to call them out.
At the same time, we also need to say there is an incredibly positive agenda out there for the drafting. There is a positive agenda on a green new deal, and I am proud that a new environmental justice commission was launched yesterday. The commission will be chaired by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the former Member for South Thanet and me, and it will look at the green new deal, at the mass mobilisation of resources into renewable energy and energy efficiency and at getting transport and agriculture right. We can do that in a way that is driven by workers. We can make sure that no one loses out in the transition and that there is, indeed, a positive story about how we can have a better life for all.

Right now, the statistics are grim. We are one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth. Fifty-nine scientists said last year that we have lost 60% of the population of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles in my lifetime. That has to change.

We can make sure that no one loses out in the transition and that there is, indeed, a positive story about how we can have a better life for all.

There is a positive agenda on a green new deal, and I am proud that a new environmental justice commission was launched yesterday. The commission will be chaired by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the former Member for South Thanet and me, and it will look at the green new deal, at the mass mobilisation of resources into renewable energy and energy efficiency and at getting transport and agriculture right. We can do that in a way that is driven by workers. We can make sure that no one loses out in the transition and that there is, indeed, a positive story about how we can have a better life for all.

Right now, the statistics are grim. We are one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth. Fifty-nine scientists said last year that we have lost 60% of the population of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles in my lifetime. That has to change.

We can make sure that no one loses out in the transition and that there is, indeed, a positive story about how we can have a better life for all.

There is a positive agenda on a green new deal, and I am proud that a new environmental justice commission was launched yesterday. The commission will be chaired by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the former Member for South Thanet and me, and it will look at the green new deal, at the mass mobilisation of resources into renewable energy and energy efficiency and at getting transport and agriculture right. We can do that in a way that is driven by workers. We can make sure that no one loses out in the transition and that there is, indeed, a positive story about how we can have a better life for all.
take up some of the demands that have been made, particularly what I and other Members have said about fracking. There is a consensus for stopping fracking, and I believe there is a consensus for continuing with onshore wind. Please, Government, listen. We can make a difference.

5.43 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) echoed many of the good things that have been said today, by people from all parts of the House, about a cause—climate change—on which we must unite. The key to this is not just calling climate change an emergency, but taking action to show that we mean it. I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to zero net carbon emissions by 2050 and to planting millions of trees across the country to help to protect our part of the planet. I hope, too, that the Government pull together a cross-departmental plan to deliver that nationally and help us to lead in the world by, for example, using DFID funds to continue the good work of its climate change unit to protect rainforests in Indonesia.

Locally, in Gloucestershire, achieving that means resolving the air pollution on the A38 by Llanthony and the huge A417 Air Balloon problem, as well as finishing the cycle paths on the canal and in the Golden valley from Gloucester to Cheltenham. It means doing much more about litter and Project Refill for water bottles; I hope that our schoolchildren will join me in taking those things forward. It also means closing the residual waste tip at Hempsted and replacing it with grass valleys harvesting solar power in due course. Both locally and nationally, we need to look again at what we are doing about onshore wind, and above all at how to use our territorial CO2 emissions, but in reality, once aviation, shipping and imports are taken into account, there has been only a 10% reduction. That is why the climate change strikes by young people and the Extinction Rebellion action has been so important: they have brought us all together to discuss this important topic.

As Greta Thunberg said, climate change is the easiest and most difficult challenge faced by humanity. But is it really that hard? It is clear that system change is urgently required, whether that is through changes to the sustainable building code, building at higher densities in our communities, or changes to the planning process, all supported by better infrastructure and public transport. We should be looking at existing properties and how a wholesale programme plan for “pay as you save” home energy insulation could be installed throughout the country. This is the sort of thinking that we need, alongside favouring onshore wind turbines and uprating our power grids to ensure that we can all use electric vehicles, whether cars or cycles. Look at Germany, where 900,000 electric bikes were purchased last year, as against 64,000 in the UK. Staying in Germany, Munich set itself the ambition to be 100% powered by renewable energy by 2025 and is on target to achieve that.

As a county councillor in Warwickshire, I was proud to propose that we made all of our pension fund fossil-free. Sadly, that proposal was not accepted, but I wish all authorities would consider that step, because it is the sort of wholesale systemic change that we need. Likewise, I proposed a Warwickshire energy plan to introduce renewable energy for all citizens in Warwickshire. Yes, the challenges are systemic and behavioural, but we can address them. We just need the political will.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sure colleagues will appreciate that it is almost impossible to get in everyone who wants to speak, but we will get more people in if colleagues take perhaps two minutes instead of three minutes, to be generous to others. I shall leave it at that.

5.45 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I have requested a climate change debate a couple of times in the past couple of months, so I am delighted that we are having this one today.

I was delighted to attend the session with Greta Thunberg a week ago. Many of us who were there will recall that she kept repeating the line, “Are you listening? Can you hear me?” She was right to be sceptical. Some of us remember the Al Gore film and book from 2006 and the Stern report from the same year. Sadly, the six key messages from that report are as valid today as they were then.

The world’s first Climate Change Act was introduced by the then Labour Government, with whom I am proud to associate myself. Their commitment not only to reducing CO2 but to having 100% zero-carbon homes by 2016 was a terrific ambition. It was picked up by the coalition Government in their 2011 Budget, but has sadly since fallen by the wayside, as has been mentioned.

It is claimed that there has been a 37% reduction of our territorial CO2 emissions, but in reality, once aviation, shipping and imports are taken into account, there has been only a 10% reduction. That is why the climate change strikes by young people and the Extinction Rebellion action has been so important: they have brought us all together to discuss this important topic.

As Greta Thunberg said, climate change is the easiest and most difficult challenge faced by humanity. But is it really that hard? It is clear that system change is urgently required, whether that is through changes to the sustainable building code, building at higher densities in our communities, or changes to the planning process, all supported by better infrastructure and public transport. We should be looking at existing properties and how a wholesale programme plan for “pay as you save” home energy insulation could be installed throughout the country. This is the sort of thinking that we need, alongside favouring onshore wind turbines and uprating our power grids to ensure that we can all use electric vehicles, whether cars or cycles. Look at Germany, where 900,000 electric bikes were purchased last year, as against 64,000 in the UK. Staying in Germany, Munich set itself the ambition to be 100% powered by renewable energy by 2025 and is on target to achieve that.

As a county councillor in Warwickshire, I was proud to propose that we made all of our pension fund fossil-free. Sadly, that proposal was not accepted, but I wish all authorities would consider that step, because it is the sort of wholesale systemic change that we need. Likewise, I proposed a Warwickshire energy plan to introduce renewable energy for all citizens in Warwickshire. Yes, the challenges are systemic and behavioural, but we can address them. We just need the political will.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sure colleagues will appreciate that it is almost impossible to get in everyone who wants to speak, but we will get more people in if colleagues take perhaps two minutes instead of three minutes, to be generous to others. I shall leave it at that.

5.48 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

I absolutely understand the concerns about climate change that have been registered loudly recently, and it is absolutely right that we take them into account, but it is also hugely important that we talk about the progress we have made so far and about building on it, rather than looking at the issue with too much fear and ignorance. I am proud that the UK leads the way, with the most impressive performance in the reduction of emissions among G20 countries. We have managed to reduce emissions by 44% since the 1990s. It is absolutely key that we drive forward, but we should do so in the belief that we can reach the ambitious targets that we have set ourselves.
Let us take renewables as an example. Back in 2010, only 6% of our electricity was generated from renewables; now, we are at almost 40%, so we should be optimistic. We should tell ourselves that we can do more, but we should also be proud of what we have done and try to lead the way when it comes to the rest of the world. My big concern is what is happening in China. It used to be the case that 70% of our power was reliant on coal. We have reduced that to the point where coal-fired power stations should be phased out by 2025. That is great news, but in China 70% of its power is reliant on coal, and it is currently building hundreds more coal-fired power stations.

The reality is that even the big steps that we take will not make that much of a difference to our one earth, but the small steps that the Chinese can take will make a huge difference. I would like to see this country—this Government—using our soft power to lead China and tell it that it is not acceptable from an environmental or even an economic perspective for it to continue using fossil fuels in the way that it does. We should use our expertise and innovators to try to take China to a better place. The reality is that China pollutes more in a single year than the UK has polluted in 100 years. China will soon be responsible for more pollution than Europe and the US put together, so it is vital that we press the Chinese to do more.

I want to send out the message to young people that, yes, they should be concerned, and that, yes, we should listen to them, but please let us start on the basis that this country has done more than most across the globe and has got itself into a better position. We will deliver more—we are committed to delivering more—but let us deal with the facts and not just the ignorance.

5.51 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It was 307 years ago that Thomas Newcomen demonstrated the first working steam engine up in Dudley Castle. It was put to work pretty rapidly, pumping the water out of Lord Dudley’s coal mines. Over the next three centuries not only did James Watt and Matthew Boulton go on to perfect the steam engine in Handsworth, but Frank Whittle led the country into the steam age.

From our region, we are very proud of our role in this nation’s industrial revolution, but we are conscious too that, as the region that sparked the carbon revolution, we have a moral responsibility now to lead the zero-carbon revolution. That task would be an awful lot easier if the Government could provide to our region four basic ideas—four basic bits of support. First, on energy, we produce just 0.3% of the country’s renewable energy. It is pretty difficult to install onshore wind in a place as dense as the west midlands, but we could absolutely roll out solar. It would be much easier if the Government reintroduced the feed-in tariffs that they so unwisely eliminated just a few years ago.

Secondly, transport is the biggest source of carbon emissions in our region. As the Secretary of State knows, we want to be the world centre of battery technology and the electric vehicles revolution in our region. That would be much easier if the Secretary of State paid heed to the Select Committee report and sorted out the muddle around the elimination of carbon-emitting engines and went for its recommendation of 2032 as the deadline for getting rid of carbon cars or vehicles.

Thirdly, on homes, we could decarbonise our housing stock much faster and lift 300,000 people out of energy poverty if we had control of eco-funding at a regional level. Finally, when it comes to replanting our forests, we should be insisting that our airports become carbon-neutral and ask them to pay an endowment to help us replant the Arden Forest and let it reconnect with the national forest planted just north of Lichfield. These are all things that we can do. We want to lead. We need a Government who help us.

5.53 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Of course there is a climate emergency. The science is very clear: we cannot continue pumping more greenhouse gases into the planet’s atmosphere. We need to get to net zero. I was enormously proud yesterday to co-sponsor the net zero carbon Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). Yesterday morning, I stood in the control room of National Grid, watching a screen the size of a wall. It was possible to see where all our electricity comes from and where it goes to; the power that has already been generated by those mammoth wind farms in the North sea; the impact of the solar panels as they are lit up; the pumped storage that time-shifts the electricity from one period of time to another; the coal-powered stations that are going down and down and soon will be no more; and, really importantly, those vast interconnectors between ourselves and the continent, which make our own electricity more resilient.

There has been great change in our infrastructure in the past decade, but we need to do more, because even if every home had a solar panel on its roof and every vehicle today was electric, our grid could not cope. The good news is that that change is coming. By 2025, the grid will be able to cope with 100% zero-carbon inputs and every new home in this country will have no fossil fuels to heat it. There is more change coming; I am really looking forward to tomorrow’s recommendations from the Committee on Climate Change.

I hope that the recommendations talk more about how we can enable more energy efficiency to save money as well as carbon, and about how we embrace the transition to electric vehicles, in which we are already leading in the EU. I hope that there is more about how we can continue to support our world-leading crop scientists, and our world-leading work on carbon capture and storage, so that we can continue to heat our homes without using more carbon even on cold, sunless and windless days. I also hope that the recommendations mention how we can support our woodlands and our peat bogs.

Most of all, I hope the Committee on Climate Change embraces and encourages the work that we are doing across the world through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Foreign Office, and our leadership in bringing countries together. I hope that those countries all come to London next year, because it is only by leading across the world that we will win this fight for the climate.
5.56 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): We need action on so many fronts to tackle this climate emergency, but time is limited so I will speak about just one. Unsurprisingly, it is about the fact that 30% of our global greenhouse gas emissions are attributable to our food system.

If we do not make changes, the food and farming system will single-handedly use up our Paris climate agreement emissions budget within the next 30 years, yet there is still a woeful failure to rise to the challenge, and there is no excuse. There have been endless wake-up calls, including from the UN, the IPCC, EAT-Lancet, Chatham House, academics from Harvard and Oxford, and many more—I have a big pile of reports in my office—yet politicians are still hitting the snooze button.

Lots of things contribute to the climate impact of our food system: the use of fossil fuels and synthetic nitrogen fertilizers on farms, methane emissions from ruminants, transportation and refrigeration. If food waste was a country, it would have the third largest carbon footprint, behind China and the USA. However, the biggest impact is from land use. Some 48% of UK land is used for animal agriculture, and 55% of that is used for animal feed, rather than for growing food that is directly eaten by humans. The destruction of the Amazon rainforest is driven by industrial farming, which destroys habitats, biodiversity and natural carbon sinks.

It has been more than 10 years since I held a debate in Westminster Hall on the environmental impact of the livestock sector. To say that the reaction I got then was hostile is an understatement, but it now feels like there is a breakthrough. This breakthrough is being led by the public, and the private sector has responded to that public demand. It is not being led by politicians. I really think we need to rise to the challenge and start talking about it. We need a net zero emissions target by 2040 in the Agriculture Bill, which the NFU now backs. We also need to reward farmers who reduce their carbon footprint, to plant more trees and to store more carbon in the soil—and yes, we need to accelerate the trend towards healthier, more sustainable diets by reducing red meat and dairy consumption by at least 30% by 2030.

Last night, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and I attended an event in Soho hosted by the Meatless Farm Company, which is calling for people to sign up to a meatless consumption target. It commissioned research by Joseph Poore of Oxford University that showed that if people replaced one beef meal a week with a plant-based meal, it would cut UK greenhouse gas emissions by some 50 million tonnes—that is a reduction of 8.4% or the equivalent of taking 16 million cars off the road. I call on all the politicians in this place who profess to care about climate change to take up that challenge.

5.58 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a mother, doctor and the MP for Sleaford and North Hykeham, I am committed to ensuring that our children inherit a world that is cleaner, safer and greener than we found it. This will be achievable only with a serious long-term and ambitious response to tackling the threat of climate change. The importance of this issue to members of the public cannot be underestimated. Indeed, in my own parliamentary office we have seen 10 times more correspondence this month on climate change than we have seen on Brexit.

This is clearly an issue of great importance to the country and my constituency, and I am very glad that the Government see it as such too. We have been a leader both at home and abroad in leading the fight against climate change. We have reduced greenhouse gas emissions in the UK by 25% since 2010, established the international climate fund to provide £5.8 billion to help the world’s poorest to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and played a crucial role in delivering the historic 2015 Paris agreement. This Government have achieved all this by decarbonising the economy at the fastest rate of any G20 country since 2000.

I have been proud to play my part through the work of the EFRA Committee in scrutinising the Environment Bill. That Bill, which will come to the Commons soon, will put the 25-year environment plan on to a statutory footing, introduce a set of environmental principles to guide future Government policy making, and establish a world-leading environmental watchdog. It will create a green governance framework that will ensure that Parliaments, for years to come, keep the environment at the heart of their decision making. I look forward to its introduction soon.

It is a common refrain that all politics is local, and climate change is no exception. Reaching the ambitious goals that were set will require action at all levels of government. In Sleaford and North Hykeham, we are lucky to be served by district and county councils that take their role in reducing emissions seriously. For example, North Kesteven District Council has reduced its carbon footprint by an incredible amount—almost 70% in the past 10 years.

Some of the concerns that we have seen on this issue have been due to how climate measures might affect the economy, but actually those fears have been misplaced, because rather than being a shackle on our economy, green energy has been a boost for it. Since 2010, our renewable energy capacity has quadrupled, and right now there are 400,000 people in the UK working in low-carbon businesses. I have had the pleasure of seeing the benefits that renewable energy can bring first-hand in my constituency at the Sleaford renewable energy plant, which burns straw to generate enough energy for 65,000 homes and saves 150,000 tonnes of CO₂ per annum in the process. I believe that the Government’s commitment to the environment is clear to see.

6.1 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the register, especially in relation to solar power and community renewable energy.

I have three small ideas for the House today: reform of capitalism, engagement in Europe and beyond, and the future of technology. On capitalism, when people say that we need a system change, they tend to be referring to a change in the energy system, but I think we need to be bolder and go wider. We need to reform our whole economic system, and that requires reform of capitalism. Nothing else will be a sufficient response to the young people protesting; nothing else will be radical enough. Decarbonising capitalism means reforming the rules for our banks, stock exchanges and pension funds to force them to take account of climate risk. If people
[Sir Edward Davey]

think that is radical, well, the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, agrees with it. Many people agree with it. We, and this Government, are getting behind the curve on the financial reforms we need. If we made them, we would radically transform the situation.

On European engagement, when I intervened on the Secretary of State earlier, I pointed out that Britain had led climate action at EU level. By winning stronger EU action, Britain influenced the United States and China, and through that we influenced the United Nations, and that led to the Paris climate treaty. Action at European level was critical for global action on climate change. As a Minister, I spent two and half years of very solid climate diplomacy across the EU, but a lot of it in Warsaw, because Poland was the issue. We worked with the Poles, we got a compromise, and we moved them over. Because of that, the whole of the EU adopted a greenhouse gas reduction target that the EU’s Climate Change Commissioner had told me was impossible. We got right to the far end of our ambition, and it was Britain leading that ambition, not going down to the bottom, as is sometimes said about us in Europe. If we are at the table, we can make that difference. Brexit is a climate disaster in itself, because it is reducing this country’s soft power and influence.

Finally, when I became Secretary of State, I was told by the Daily Mail and various other people that renewables were too expensive, and did I not know that the sun does not always shine and the wind does not always blow? Because of the policies we introduced, renewables are now the cheapest option, and that is fantastic for this country and the world. Intermittency, which is the other problem, is fast being solved through storage, interconnectors, the smart grid and demand-side response. If we add in tidal power and CCS, we can have the base load to sort out the problem relatively quickly. The solutions are there. We need the political will and determination to drive them through and meet this climate emergency.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am afraid we have not done that well at my idea of Members voluntarily speaking for two minutes, so I am reducing the time limit to two minutes. I am sorry, but I want to get as many people in as possible.

6.5 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I shall rush what I have to say, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It may well help if we understand what we mean by “state of emergency”. Section I of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 states that an emergency is “an event or situation which threatens serious damage to human welfare in a place in the United Kingdom”.

It then lists those different events. I contend that we are in a state of emergency, and we should respond accordingly.

My main point is that we are here today because of Extinction Rebellion. People came to London—many of them from Stroud; some say that it was born out of Stroud—and they made speeches, got arrested, disrupted and stuck themselves to things, including my party leader’s fence. It is important to understand that the protests were about bringing home to us what we should be doing—and what we are doing today—which is declaring a state of emergency, so that we genuinely do something about climate change.

We cannot park this until 2050. We need to do things now, over the next 10 years. We need to halve our carbon emissions over that time, to stand any chance of reaching our target by 2050. We have to stop fracking. We have to stop airport expansion. We have to end fossil fuel subsidies. One thing we have not talked a lot about today is waste disposal. Waste cannot be disposed of by a massive expansion of incineration, because that will add to our emissions. I hope we will get the message and do radical things, and then the people who came here and got arrested will have done it for a purpose.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You may not be aware, but the Defence Secretary has just been sacked. Have you had any indication that the Prime Minister will be coming here to speak?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): No, I have not, and we need to get on with the debate. I call Daniel Zeichner.

6.7 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I think we were all impressed by the passion of the children across the country who have taken action over the last few weeks and those in Extinction Rebellion who had never been involved in protests before.

We can all talk about climate change, but seeing the evidence at first hand makes a real difference. I was fortunate to visit the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge last week, where Dr Huw Griffiths, who I was paired with in a Royal Society scheme and who was just back from the Antarctic, and Professor David Vaughan showed me their extraordinary ice cores. Ice cores are dug down deep into the ice, forming a pathway back into the past, with little bubbles from centuries past captured from the atmosphere. They are able to chart the rises and falls in temperature and emissions in the atmosphere and show exactly what has happened to our climate over the last few millennia. The chart shows temperatures going up and down, up and down, and we should be entering the cooling period, but the chart shows that temperatures are going up. That graphic representation makes it all clear.

That is why the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was so right last year to demand “rapid”, “unprecedented” and “far-reaching” transitions. We are not seeing that from the Government. For example, we have not seen cuts in road transport emissions, so why were the Government so pathetic in their response to suggestions that they look again at the fuel duty escalator? For goodness’ sake! It was introduced by a Conservative Government. Why was there such a negative response to Labour’s brave suggestion to restore our bus services by transferring money from vehicle excise duty? Those are the kinds of things that will make the difference—not honeyed words, as we heard from the Secretary of State, but rapid, unprecedented and far-reaching transitions. That is what we need.
6.9 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I want to remind Members why we are even here to debate the climate crisis in the first place. We are not here because of an international effort co-ordinated by world leaders, the recent cyclone in Mozambique or the increasing incidence of climate disasters wrecking havoc across our planet. We are here because, last August, a small group of schoolchildren decided to walk out of school to take a stand against climate change, and they have inspired a global movement. In one sense, this is testament to the great power of protest and a cause for hope in future generations, but it is also an indictment of our global political leadership. Frankly, it is an embarrassment that it should take a group of schoolchildren to pressure us to act.

The younger generations have exposed the abjectfailings of the world’s decision makers. We saw these failings on display just last week, when the Secretary of State for International Trade seemed to legitimise climate change denial. His comments displayed a stunning level of ignorance about climate change—an ignorance that runs throughout the Tory party.

Make no mistake: climate change is happening at a terrifying pace. Only through urgent and co-ordinated action can we tackle this crisis. Doing nothing is simply not an option. I have been contacted by many of my constituents about this very issue. As the MP for Warrington South, I have called on Warrington Borough Council to declare an environment and climate emergency. In this country, we led the way in the industrial revolution, and it would be fitting if we were the architects of a green country, we led the way in the industrial revolution, and we need to act.

The student strikers chanted “we will be facing…climate breakdown…if those in power don’t act urgently and radically to change our trajectory.” We must hear these words. I pay tribute to the school climate strikers, along with Extinction Rebellion. More importantly, I want to pay tribute to the many students, children and young people in my constituency who have written to me about the climate crisis, particularly those from Alderbrook school. One year 6 student wrote to me that “it is heartbreaking to know that our generation is going to suffer from the chaos that we haven’t created.” That is what will happen if we do not rise to this emergency because the science is clear.

The student strikers chanted “system change, not climate change”, and that is what we need—that is a fact. We need a green economy, investment in renewable energy and a ban on fracking, and we need to decarbonise our society. We need this for climate justice and for social justice. We need an economy that puts people and our planet before profit. This is an emergency, and we cannot afford to wait. We must act.

6.13 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I first put on record the excellent work of the Hornsey and Wood Green climate emergency activists—they invited me to a meeting well in advance of Greta Thunberg’s visit and were ahead of the protesters—and the schoolchildren from schools in Hornsey and Wood Green who marched on London to demand change?

Transport is the most emitting sector of the UK economy, responsible for 27% of greenhouse gas emissions, and the figure increases to a staggering 40% if we include our share of international shipping and aviation. That is the one we can really do something about at the three levels of government. First, the Government must fund bus services—end of—and there is an election tomorrow where that will feature in big style.

Secondly, at local level, I was the council leader when we introduced the first 20 mph speed zone in London. At first it was considered ridiculous by the local papers, but it has now become rather fashionable. It is very much welcomed, for the sake of their lungs, by many young people and families.

Thirdly, I want to put on the record the work being done by the Mayor of London. That is not easy, as a lot of people will be affected. The ultra low emission zone in central London went live earlier this month. It is a very brave move, which later we will consider normal although at the moment it is a little uncomfortable. Well done to the Mayor and all our councillors who work so hard, day in, day out, on recycling, transport, cycling and all the things that make our environment better.

Finally, I want to put on the record the work being done on children’s asthma and respiratory health by Ella Kissi-Debrah’s mother, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby). She has worked so hard to convince others of the importance of climate change and transport.

6.15 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): As a planet and as a country, we stand at a crossroads. In the month of Extinction Rebellion, Greta Thunberg’s visit to our country, and countless emails and conversations with constituents, we must ask whether we will use those interventions as a much needed wake-up call to take the urgent action we need. Alternatively, will we just make more excuses to create further delay and brush our country’s future under the carpet once more?

We all agree that we need a cross-party approach to this crisis, but looking at this Government’s record I fear that they are leading us down the path of excuse and delay. They have banned onshore wind subsidies, they are axing Labour’s solar panel subsidies, and their attempts to reduce emissions have stalled.

Then we come to the Government’s fracking policy. Fracking is a dangerous, disruptive and disastrous method of fuelling our country. It extracts fossil fuels at the expense of our environment and our communities, and the environmental risks from fracking to former coalfield sites are clear, so in Leigh we have expressed our total opposition to it—it does not have our consent, and the Government should follow Labour’s lead and ban it.
In my constituency, the site of one former colliery is now a renowned 200-hectare country park and nature reserve, where over 230 species of bird have been identified. I suggest that sites such as that have been of greater benefit to our town than any fracking site could ever be. Rather than turning to the energy of old, we should be looking at how we reduce our emissions and help people to make greener choices. That starts with bringing railway stations back to our towns.

All this does not have to be burdensome; it can be full of hope, opportunity and positivity. But we must get on and act—the next generation is watching and judging.

6.19 pm
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Over six months ago, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that we had just 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe. The leading scientific experts in the world told us in no uncertain terms that urgent changes were needed to cut the risk of extreme heat, drought, floods and poverty. To put it another way, we should take urgent action before catastrophic life loss occurs. No such urgent action has taken place.

At the World Economic Forum in January, Sir David Attenborough told world leaders that we are destroying the natural world—and with it, ourselves. But no real urgent action followed. We have known for decades now that climate change was a threat to our planet. Many have devoted their lives to the climate change cause, to wake the world from its complacency and make it understand the gravity of the situation. But human beings are not great at planning and preparing for their future, and even less good at planning for the benefit of future generations.

I am very pleased that last month Bedford Borough Council voted unanimously to declare a climate emergency and committed to a six-month project to identify actions needed to achieve its 2030 carbon neutrality target. We heard from scientists who talked of the deafening sound of huge glaciers calving off the Greenland ice shelf and said that the current logging and burning of tropical forests releases more carbon dioxide than our remaining forests could possibly absorb.

I urge this Government, like Bedford Borough Council and other local authorities, to show true world leadership and declare a climate emergency. Nothing short of a green revolution will do. I am very happy to support the motion.

6.19 pm
Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The UK Student Climate Network, the Fridays for Future movement and Extinction Rebellion—these movements for climate action, driven by passion and activism, follow proud traditions of movements for change throughout our history, such as the trade unions. This week, the Communication Workers Union, at its annual conference in Bournemouth, also debated climate change.

I was pleased to see recently cross-party political talks. Positive commitments emerged from those talks. Sadly, there was no Prime Minister and no Conservative party representation.

To conclude, I want to reflect on a recent meeting I had with a young constituent of mine, Alexander. He had come to one of my surgeries in Moodiesburn concerned about the lack of action on climate change. He made an overnight journey last week from Moodiesburn to London to participate in the climate change protests. He said to me, rephrasing a quote from a world war two book he had read:

“Britain’s honour and its national interests are at stake. Our planet is under attack and there can be no further delays on declaring war on climate change, whatever the other nations decide to do.”

How right that statement is. There can be no further delays. We have to act now. It is time for the UK to declare a climate emergency.

6.23 pm
Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): On Monday, I was privileged to host students from the fabulous St Bonaventure’s boys school in my constituency, who are working with the East London Citizens Organisation and the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, CAFOD, learning about politics and campaigning for social justice and a brighter future. They wanted to talk to me about housing, Brexit and the violence that has blighted our community, but most of all they wanted to talk to me about climate change. Their dedication and knowledge gave me hope.

Xavier told me that we need to stop trees being destroyed for developments in the UK. Ethan told me how important it is for us to invest more in research and development to produce the green innovations that will help us to reduce emissions. He wants to become a scientist and help with those challenges—I reckon he’ll do it. Arpon told me we needed to stop fracking and rely on renewables—not just because of the carbon consequences, but because of the impact on clean water and the local environment. Ethan—another Ethan—told me how inspired he is by the idea of a green new deal in the US, and what will make a green industrial revolution here. Thomas told me that we need so many, many more charging points for electric cars.

Thomas is right, Arpon is right, Xavier is right and Ethan—both Ethans—is right. What we need is a genuine commitment from the Government to act. Oceans rising, deforestation, wildfires, hundreds of millions at risk of flooding, displacement, drought, disease and starvation. Mass extinction, with huge numbers of species lost. That is what we face. We need a commitment to implement green policies on a scale that matches the enormous challenges that face us. Transformation of our economy, homes, transport, agriculture and energy systems. Transformation of our entire society, creating greater social justice as well as securing our very future on planet Earth. We know what we need to do. Let’s get on with it.

6.23 pm
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): We have heard an awful lot about the various approaches we should be taking, but what we have not heard about—this is important—is the impact this is presently having on some of our communities. I am going to do what many MPs do—talk about my constituency. Do not switch off, because what is happening in Fairbourne will be happening in other communities around the United Kingdom and around Wales in the years to come.
The sea is rising 4.7 millimetres a year in Barmouth. That is not exclusive to Barmouth; it is happening everywhere. The spring tides—they do not just happen in spring—are now higher than the level of the land in Fairbourne. There are 470 properties, with 1,200 people living there. There is a masterplan, but it has very little budget and virtually no statutory power. Some reckon the sea defences, which cost £6 million over the past eight years, can protect for 40 years. It is reckoned that they can be protected at a cost of £10 million, but we do not know where those people or their houses will be in 40 years’ time.

One person has understandably written to me, but she does not want her MP to talk about the challenges faced by Fairbourne. She says that the council and the environment authority are wrong, that the sea is not rising, and that, if it is, that is an unmitigated disaster for everyone, so there is no point in doing anything at all. To quote from recent correspondence:

“Fairbourne is a happy and friendly place to live and everyone gets on with life. So please don’t go stirring up old news now.”

Après moi, le déluge.

Hon. Members can see the political incentive to keep quiet. The easiest thing to do would be to keep my head down, save for the fact that that is the crux of the problem with our short-termism, our self-interest politics. Fairbourne is what a climate change emergency looks like. It is slow, but it is happening, and we have little response to it.

6.25 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): In the 1970s, as a teenager, I first got involved in political activity through campaigning on the environment and against nuclear power. It is amazing the change that has happened since. Then we were dismissed as cranks and eccentrics; now that thinking is mainstream.

However, understand that the question now is not whether human activity threatens the survival of the planet. It is not even whether we need to do more to curb that activity. The question before us now is whether it is even possible for us to accelerate what we are doing in order to avoid a tipping point, when the damage becomes irreversible and the downward trajectory unstoppable. That point does not come in 2050; it comes in about 10 years’ time. That is why this is an emergency and why the Government need to do more.

Let me give a couple of examples of where the Government should do more. I eat red meat. I should eat less of it—as we all should. However, hon. Members can go into any supermarket in this country and buy a kilo of beef for less than a kilo of green beans. We need the Government to take action with our food producers, using every lever at their disposal, including tax, subsidy and regulation, to make sure that families in this country can eat nutritious food with a low-carbon footprint without putting themselves at an economic disadvantage.

Another example is that I come to this place by train from Edinburgh, but only because the taxpayers pay the fare. If they did not, I would have the same dilemma as everyone else in my constituency, because on any day of the week it is cheaper to fly from Edinburgh to London than to take the train. That is a ludicrous and unsustainable situation. To cure it, we need a radical and rapid expansion of public transport in this country, the like of which will give the Minister nightmares. Not enough is being done; I am sorry to break with the consensual backslapping. Things need to change, and we need the Government to do more.

6.27 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I heard Greta Thunberg speak at the meeting here last week, where, on behalf of her generation, she demanded that we declare a climate crisis and take serious, effective action based on what scientists tell us. At that meeting, and again today, we heard lots of warm words from the Environment Secretary, but he is always weak on new action. If this country is to justify our reputation as world leaders in carbon reduction and on the environment, far more needs to be done.

I have time for three points. First, the Government should reverse the decision to build a third runway at Heathrow, which will add 6 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year, making Heathrow the biggest emitter of CO₂ in the UK, as well as adding yet more to local air pollution. As Department for Transport analysis shows, it will produce no net benefit to the economy anyway.

Secondly, we have seen good work on air pollution by London Mayor Sadiq Khan, who has just introduced the ultra low emission zone and who took the Government to court over their illegal air pollution plans. However, we need Government intervention to help the Mayor and other forward-thinking local leaders, including by initiating scrappage schemes and significantly investing in and supporting clean and green solutions for transport and for waste and recycling.

Thirdly, I suggest that the Government support and listen to a citizens’ assembly on climate and ecological justice. The Government plan to take us out of the EU, which has, among its other environmental policies, ensured that UK beaches are now clean and pollution free. At the same time, they will roll out the red carpet for President Trump, who claims that global warming is a hoax and has pulled the US out of the Paris agreement. On the climate and environmental crises, let the warm words be matched by serious action.

6.29 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On behalf of my constituents, I want to declare a climate change emergency. I have received compelling correspondence about the need for us to declare one, 10 years before we see irreversible change to our climate the likes of which we will not be able to comprehend. I was struck by the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), who said we needed a national mission of the likes we have never seen before to solve this problem. We need to grasp it in the same way the Americans did with the space race. We need to set national targets to decarbonise and be the first nation to truly enter the green era of industrialisation.

The nation that I represent, Scotland, was the first to industrialise in the industrial revolution. It saw the most rapid industrialisation of any country in the world. We will have to adopt the same sort of bigger imagination and purpose if we are to achieve that, but I am afraid that the Government at all levels are singularly failing to grasp the urgency and the burning need to adapt radically. On the one hand, I hear great rhetoric, but on the other hand, I see valuable projects in my constituency.
being defunded, such as the climate challenge funding for housing associations and other local organisations. In one breath, the Scottish Government are declaring a climate emergency, which I welcome, while also defunding local projects in my constituency.

Likewise, I would like to see a national project to fully develop public transport across our country. It is a critical issue that is causing social dislocation. We have seen privatisation and fragmentation of our public transport system in this country. Why are we not seeing a radical project to re-municipalise, reintegrate and establish affordable, convenient and comprehensive public transport across the country? That would be the radical change needed. We could utilise it to grow our industrialise base as well. We have huge capability in bus manufacturing in this country. Let us, for example, set a target to be the first nation to have completely decarbonised bus travel across this country. Labour has made a radical proposal for a totally free and comprehensive bus service across the whole of Scotland. That is the sort of radical thinking we need, and we need it now. The Government need to act.

6.31 pm  

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The IPCC said we had until 2030 to avoid a 1.5°C rise in global temperatures. We must get to net zero carbon by 2030 at the latest, not by the Government’s target of 2050. How do we get there? What must be done? First, we need to repurpose the Treasury and economic policy. In the short term, all Government spending, priorities and programmes should be assessed against our climate goals. The next spending review needs to be a climate emergency spending review. Too little of Government spending is on climate change priorities. By contrast, 25% of the EU’s budget for 2021-27 will be climate related.

We must underpin an industrial retooling of our whole country and our productive output for the 21st century. Many of my colleagues call that the green new deal—a reimagining of FDR’s great rebuilding of America—but I call it a Marshall plan for the environment. We must work alongside our European partners to build a new, clean, fossil-free Europe.

The UK also needs to account for its exported carbon. The Government claim to have achieved the world’s sharpest decline in emissions, but what about the embedded emissions in our all products? The sustainability research institute at the University of Leeds has developed a model to reallocate those emissions from industries to the final consumers of products. This model, developed by John Barrett and Anne Owen, is a world leader in terms of working out the UK’s carbon footprint. Will the Secretary of State meet them and adopt this model?

Finally, we need a new climate economics. The Global Commission on the Economy and Climate concludes that the choice between tackling climate change and boosting economic growth is a false choice. Instead, it says that economic growth and reducing emissions are mutually beneficial. Fitoussi, Stiglitz and Sen, three of the best economists in the world, have done substantial work for the French Government to measure societal wellbeing in ways that go beyond traditional measures such as an economy’s GDP. The UK Government need to look at measures that supersede gross domestic product and focus on solving our climate emergency.

6.35 pm  

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): We have heard many claims from Government Members about the progress that the Government have made on climate change, but the fact is they have systemically demolished the policies put in place under the Climate Change Act 2008, introduced by a Labour Government, and increased public spending on fossil fuels. We all remember David Cameron’s “Let’s get rid of the green crap” comment. He began the process of comprehensive policy reversal. This was accelerated by the current Prime Minister, who famously, on her second day in office, showed her commitment to tackling climate change by abolishing the Department.

The International Monetary Fund reported in 2015 that the UK had spent £26 billion on fossil fuel subsidies in 2015, much of that going overseas, since 85% of the UK’s coal demand was being met through imports. In 2015, the UK subsidised fossil fuels to the tune of three to four times what it spent on renewables, contributing in the process to catastrophic global climate change effects.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth agrees that action on climate change is necessary. A month ago, however, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), about the UK’s woeful performance in relation to the Aichi biodiversity targets. In 2010, we pledged to meet the 20 targets by 2020—next year—but we are on track to meet just five of them. We are falling down particularly on target 20, which relates to the mobilisation of financial resources. Although they signed up to those targets, the Government now describe them as “nebulous”, and are talking about the next set of targets. As one of my constituents said, “they are ignoring the targets, but looking forward to Britain being ahead in the next set of targets... Is this parliament or a sketch from the Tracy Ullman show?”

Last summer, the International Development Committee started an inquiry into UK aid for combating climate change, and yesterday we agreed to publish our report next week. Climate change cuts across everything, and the effectiveness of all UK aid spending depends on addressing it. We have been struck by the Government’s incoherent approach, especially in relation to the support...
given to fossil fuels by UK Export Finance. Global Witness told us that that was leading to circumstances in which

“the UK government is providing climate aid with one hand, and exporting the UK’s fossil fuel pollution with the other, all the while undermining its climate action credentials”.

We need coherence and consistency. It is incumbent on the Government today to respond to the climate emergency in both their domestic and their international policy, so that we can ensure that combating climate change is at the front and centre of everything we do.

*Debate interrupted.*

---

**Speaker’s Statement**

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next speaker, I must advise the House that I have received notification from the petition officer for the constituency of Peterborough, in respect of the recall petition for Fiona Onasanya. The recall petition process for the constituency of Peterborough, established under the Recall of MPs Act 2015, closed today at 5 pm. As more than 10% of those eligible to sign the petition have done so, I advise the House that the petition was successful. Fiona Onasanya is no longer the Member for Peterborough, and the seat is accordingly vacant. She can therefore no longer participate in any parliamentary proceedings as a Member of Parliament. I shall cause the text of the notification to be published in the *Votes and Proceedings* and in the *Official Report*.

[The notification will appear at the end of today’s proceedings.]
Environment and Climate Change

Debate resumed.

6.38 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I pay tribute to Greta Thunberg and the school strikers, including those from my constituency, and to the protesters whom we saw outside Parliament last week for ensuring that climate change is once again at the top of the political agenda, where it must be. Under this Government and in this global context, their actions are necessary.

The Government have failed on climate change. Since 2010, a raft of policies and initiatives that were driving progress have been scrapped. Today, Conservative Members have called for action on energy efficiency, yet the Tory Government’s cancellation of the green homes scheme means that the retrofitting of insulation is 5% of its level in 2012. We should have been building on those initiatives to make further progress, not talking about the extent to which we have moved backwards.

In the very limited time that is available to me, I want to raise an issue that has not been mentioned so far today: fossil fuel divestment. Part of the system change that we need to see involves taking money out of dirty, damaging, exploitative fossil fuel extraction. We can do something about that here, in this place. Both my local councils, Lambeth and Southwark, have committed to divest their pension funds out of fossil fuels, yet our parliamentary pension funds remain invested in fossil fuels, despite 100 Members writing to the trustees last year calling on them to divest and remove our money from fossil fuels and invest it in sustainable industries. I call on all Members here to join that call.

We need the Government to act comprehensively at the scale required by an emergency. Climate change demands that it is the prism and the underpinning principle of all our political and economic decision making. We must act to address this emergency.

6.40 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I would like to know whether our desperation to seal trade deals with other countries, especially the United States, will inhibit our ability to talk candidly with them about the need for them to change tack on climate change, because I want the Government to embed in our political agenda, where it must be, the fact that climate change is once again at the top of the political agenda, where it must be. Under this Government and in this global context, their actions are necessary.

The Government have failed on climate change. Since 2010, a raft of policies and initiatives that were driving progress have been scrapped. Today, Conservative Members have called for action on energy efficiency, yet the Tory Government’s cancellation of the green homes scheme means that the retrofitting of insulation is 5% of its level in 2012. We should have been building on those initiatives to make further progress, not talking about the extent to which we have moved backwards.

In the very limited time that is available to me, I want to raise an issue that has not been mentioned so far today: fossil fuel divestment. Part of the system change that we need to see involves taking money out of dirty, damaging, exploitative fossil fuel extraction. We can do something about that here, in this place. Both my local councils, Lambeth and Southwark, have committed to divest their pension funds out of fossil fuels, yet our parliamentary pension funds remain invested in fossil fuels, despite 100 Members writing to the trustees last year calling on them to divest and remove our money from fossil fuels and invest it in sustainable industries. I call on all Members here to join that call.

We need the Government to act comprehensively at the scale required by an emergency. Climate change demands that it is the prism and the underpinning principle of all our political and economic decision making. We must act to address this emergency.

6.42 pm

Annemarie Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My city of Oxford has not just declared a climate emergency, but is putting in place the UK’s first ever zero emissions zone and is also convening right now a citizens’ assembly to discuss measures to deal with that climate emergency. If we decide collectively in this House that we have a climate emergency, we must act on it, and we need to do so above all in three areas.

First, house building standards were watered down appallingly under the coalition Government. We have been told there will be changes on energy efficiency, but we need to go further. The Government not only need to change on energy efficiency, but also need to make sure we are protecting wildlife in every new development, particularly those between Oxford and Cambridge.

Secondly, we need concerted action from central Government to promote environmental innovation. At present, we are relying on enthusiasts, volunteers and individual companies and councils to drive that change. That is not good enough. I am very proud of project LEO and project ERIC in Oxford—big projects changing our energy infrastructure locally—but they need to be backed up by Government investment otherwise this will be piecemeal. This should be mainstream, not just a matter for enthusiasts.

Finally, we must be honest about the challenges we face; I agree with the Secretary of State that we have got to be honest. I am sick and tired of hearing people say they care about the environment and then the next minute tweet out criticism of a policy like the ultra-low emission zone. I am very proud of those who say, “Yes, we’ve got to take those difficult steps and have those difficult conversations,” including London Labour MPs such my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous).

We are facing up to it; we are dealing with this in a grown-up manner, and that is what Government should be doing, not, sadly, making the sort of short-term politically expedient points that we so often hear greeting environmental measures. Let us grow up, just like those kids have been doing when out in the streets; that is what we need to do in this place.
6.44 pm

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): I would like to talk not only about what the national Government can do but about what local councils can do. There will be elections tomorrow in High Peak and in rural districts across the whole of England, in which local people can show their commitment to taking the measures needed to tackle climate change by voting for Labour councillors who are putting forward practical proposals to tackle it.

Labour councillors on my council in High Peak voted to ban fracking and to declare a climate change emergency, in the face of opposition from Conservative councillors, who have not taken the actions that we need in this area.

They are not proposing to introduce proper passive housing standards, and they are not legislating for clean air; they are not even monitoring it properly. Where they are monitoring air pollution, they are refusing to release the results, even from outside schools, despite the fact that parents are concerned about their children’s health.

Not a single public charging point for electric vehicles has been installed in High Peak for the past four years under that Conservative council, yet people are crying out to be able to use electric vehicles. They are also crying out to be able to use public transport, but we are seeing our buses cut and our train services not being supported. It is the Labour councillors who are out there fighting for our bus services and working with local companies and local people on cycle routes to ensure that people can cycle to work and use their cycles for leisure, to reduce emissions in a practical way, not just by doing things like banning fracking but by supporting renewable energy in a positive way at local level. That is what every local person across rural England can do tomorrow: they can back policies that will support the environment and make this change real.

6.46 pm

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is an honour to close today’s debate. It has been the kind of debate that justifies why the public go to the ballot box to put us here. We have had 63 collegiate, wise and passionate speeches today, including from the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who talked about farmers being displaced by the salination of their land, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), who made my favourite comment of the day when he said:

“When you are drowning, you do not ask yourself, ‘Ooh, what is politically possible?’; you do whatever it takes to survive.”

We also heard the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), and I have to say that Newport will be proud of her tonight, as will her predecessor, who I am sure is smiling down today.

We also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who was applauded right across the House for his groundbreaking work on climate change. He said that every political issue that we consider must deal with climate change. In that vein, I want to pay tribute to the many colleagues who have not had the opportunity to speak today but who have been leading the charge on climate change, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who are sitting behind me today.

The great Salford poet and songwriter Ewan MacColl once wrote, in a song about hiking on the moors:

“I may be a wage slave on Monday, but I am a free man on Sunday.”

Now, whether or not you like his music, or his politics, I think there are three things we can take from that on which almost everyone in this House would agree. First, the environment is not something separate from ourselves, something out there; it is part of our freedom. When we talk about the environment, we are talking about the places that mean the most to us, about our food, about the air we breathe. We know that 70% of the world’s oxygen is produced by marine life, but that life is threatened by ocean warming and acidification caused by the carbon put into the atmosphere.

Secondly, climate change and the environment are not luxury concerns. It is working people who benefit the most when our public spaces flourish—urban or rural—and it is the poorest, both at home and internationally, who will be hit first and worst by the climate emergency. As we have heard today, it is working people who have the most to gain from a green industrial revolution that could transform our economy, creating hundreds of thousands of good jobs. We on this side of the House estimate that retrofitting the UK’s housing stock could create 160,000 jobs right across the UK, and that offshore wind could create 120,000 jobs by 2030, largely in coastal towns and regions that have struggled for decades.

Thirdly, our climate and our environment are in deep trouble. We do not have to look far to see that climate change is already a disaster for many across the world, from the cyclone that recently struck Mozambique to the protracted droughts in east Africa. If we continue on our current path, we face unimaginable losses for every Member’s constituency and for people and communities across the world. But here’s the thing: it does not have to be that way. We are running out of time, but there is still time, so let us use it well and start today by declaring a climate emergency.

What does it mean to declare an emergency? The motion sets out some guidance. It means reducing our greenhouse gas emissions as rapidly as possible and down to net zero before 2050, with short-term targets for the green energy transition and sustainable modes of transport. It means properly funding environmental protection domestically and legislating to reduce waste, moving towards a zero-waste economy. It means capturing the green jobs of the future and mitigating the impact of transitioning to a low-carbon economy on workers and regions. It means bringing wildlife and biodiversity back to levels that I am too young to remember but by which, as we know from David Attenborough, anybody is too young or too old to be captivated. Perhaps more than anything, declaring an emergency means that we will devote the time and resources to the problem that are commensurate with its scale. We can start that today by declaring a climate and environment emergency. The motion gives us a basis on which to act, and that is why I commend it to the House.

6.51 pm

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Greg Clark): This excellent debate has been vigorous and well subscribed, as befits a subject of such profound importance. What has been established so
clearly is that a deep sense of responsibility for protecting and improving our environment is shared across both sides of this House.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) for her maiden speech. She used warm words about her predecessor and said that he used his sense of humour to engage with people. I think she has bought his book on how to be an MP, but her speech today showed that she is already making great strides, so I do not think that she needs too many lessons. Having been in front of her predecessor at the Select Committees on which he served, I know that he could also be a fierce interrogator, and I am sure that she will learn that skill as well.

Like the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who gave a profound speech, reflecting on some of the lessons of leadership both in his term as Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and as leader of the Labour party. He was right in saying that moral authority comes from being able to act, and that is one of the reasons why, even though we are a small country in terms of the contribution we make to emissions, we have the moral authority that comes from being a leader. We must continue that with our action. He pointed out that we of course have different visions of how we get there, which is legitimate, but that is not to decry the motivation we share.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) offered a good example of what we can do in our constituencies. We should look to the climate vision on her website to see whether we can emulate it across all our constituencies to embrace our role as local leaders, as well as leaders in this place. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) reminded us that nuclear has played and will play a distinguished role in ensuring that we can generate power free from emissions.

Finally, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) whose work in opposition on producing a paper on the low-carbon economy established considerable consensus across this House and was seminal in shaping the Climate Change Act 2008, which the right hon. Member for Doncaster North led—I know that he will recognise that contribution.

The tone of this debate underlines why we should not create division in this House where there is none. When it comes to environmentalism and climate change, one of this country’s proudest achievements is that we have displayed to the world in international forums an impressive national determination to lead our country and the world, with the baton of responsibility being passed from one Government to their successors.

Mrs Thatcher, as many Members have said in this debate, was the very first global leader to acknowledge the UN 

“What may be early signs of man-induced climatic change.”

Her speech in 1989 bears rereading for those who may not be familiar with the profundity of her anticipation of the problems with which we are grappling. It is not just the anticipation of the problems; she was a woman of action. If we think back to what she did—it was thought impossible at the time—virtually to eradicate CFCs across the world. She described the task of Government

“to follow the best advice available. To decide where the balance of evidence lies. And to take prudent action.”

Over the years, we have done that.

The last Labour Government passed the Climate Change Act with cross-party support, and the right hon. Member for Doncaster North will acknowledge that the Conservative party, then in opposition, participated in amending the Bill to increase the ambition from 60% targets to the current 80% targets. When it started its life, the Bill included a 60% target; and when it left this House, the target was the 80% proposed by the Stern Review.

If we take the motion as moved, there is no reason to fracture the consensus that has been such an important feature of this area. The first sentence of the motion reflects what we have recognised all along: the need to reduce emissions is urgent and compelling and we should heed the advice of the scientists who comprise the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We have always considered that to be right, and I am glad we agree.

The second sentence rightly calls attention to the consequences of global warming for the natural environment and society. Going back to 1990, again, Mrs Thatcher said:

“Weather patterns could change so that what is now wet would become dry, and what is now dry would become wet... The character and behaviour of plants would change... Some species of animals and plants would migrate to different zones or disappear for ever.”

The third sentence of the motion calls on the House to increase the UK’s targets under the Climate Change Act and to ensure that we capture the benefits of the low-carbon economy. As all Members know, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) and I commissioned the Committee on Climate Change, after the Paris accord, to advise us on precisely how we can reflect this raised ambition in our targets. As we know, it will publish that assessment tomorrow. We did not ask for that advice in order to ignore it; we intend to act on it, and we are proud of the progress we have made.

I have been reading some of the policy documents that were being debated when we were forging this consensus in 2008. Between 1997 and 2007 our greenhouse gas emissions were increasing, and they were increasing at the rate of 2% a year between 1999 and 2004. Since then, we have transformed our performance and our reputation. Since 2000, few countries in the world, and none in the G20, have gone faster than Great Britain in decarbonising their economy. We will continue to set the pace over the years ahead, during which the battle to halt catastrophic climate change will be won or lost. We intend to win.

The motion concludes by urging further action to restore our natural environment and to create a circular economy. Through the environment Bill, the Agriculture Bill, the industrial strategy and our clean growth strategy, we will do precisely that.

I hope we can maintain this common purpose. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles set out her party’s position. There is not one person who joins my party
who is not concerned about the heritage of our planet. Conservation, preservation and the inheritance of future generations are a deep instinct of every Conservative. It is not new; nor does it sit at variance with our governing policy. Indeed, our traditional concerns for the environment and a prosperous economy should not be seen as in contradiction to each other. As we consider the threats from climate change, let us remember that, without prosperity, people also become extinct. Enterprise has been the greatest rebellion against extinction in the history of the world, so the economy and climate change have to be brought together.

The only thing that will work to deal with climate change is where the market is adapted to ensure both prosperity and the conservation of our environment. I am proud that Britain is an advanced capitalist nation, but one with a deep respect for its environment.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House declares an environment and climate emergency following the finding of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change that to avoid a more than 1.5°C rise in global warming, global emissions would need to fall by around 45 per cent from 2010 levels by 2030, reaching net zero by around 2050; recognises the devastating impact that volatile and extreme weather will have on UK food production, water availability, public health and through flooding and wildfire damage; notes that the UK is currently missing almost all of its biodiversity targets, with an alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50 per cent to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling those problems; calls on the Government to increase the ambition of the UK’s climate change targets under the Climate Change Act 2008 to achieve net zero emissions before 2050, to increase support for and set ambitious, short-term targets for the roll-out of renewable and low carbon energy and transport, and to move swiftly to capture economic opportunities and green jobs in the low carbon economy while managing risks for workers and communities currently reliant on carbon intensive sectors; and further calls on the Government to lay before the House within the next six months urgent proposals to restore the UK’s natural environment and to deliver a circular, zero waste economy.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am proud to be part of a Parliament that has passed a motion declaring a climate and environment emergency. However, I want to draw attention to the fact that the motion included a certain set of actions for the Government to carry out. It calls on the Government “to increase the ambition of the UK’s climate change targets under the Climate Change Act 2008 to achieve net zero emissions before 2050, to increase support for and set ambitious, short-term targets for the roll-out of renewable and low carbon energy and transport, and to move swiftly to capture economic opportunities and green jobs in the low carbon economy while managing risks for workers and communities currently reliant on carbon intensive sectors; and further calls on the Government to lay before the House within the next six months urgent proposals to restore the UK’s natural environment and to deliver a circular, zero waste economy.”

Mr Speaker, may I ask what parliamentary levers are available to this House to ensure that such action is taken?

Mr Speaker: The process of government, and the process of scrutiny of Government by Parliament, otherwise known as continuing debate.

Mr Nicholas Brown: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In view of your statement to the House earlier about the results of the Peterborough recall petition, I hope it is helpful, if you will allow me, to inform the House that I will move the writ for the by-election at start of business tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. That is certainly informative, and I appreciate what the right hon. Gentleman, on behalf of Her Majesty’s official Opposition, has said.
Children’s Funeral Fund

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

Mr Speaker: I appreciate that colleagues are in a state of some animation, but I would very gently point out that the subject of the Adjournment is the children’s funeral fund. This is a matter of the utmost seriousness and sensitivity, and the track record of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) in relation to this subject is long established and widely respected. I am sure that colleagues remaining in the Chamber will wish to hear what the hon. Lady has to say and what the Minister offers by way of response.

The question is—we want to hear it; we really want to hear it—that this House do now adjourn.

7.3 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Anyone who has visited my office here in Westminster will be able to testify that one of its walls is chaotically adorned with a vision of my world. There are newspaper articles, thank-you cards and notes from colleagues and constituents to remind me that I have an army of support and that campaigns can be won. There are family photos and pictures of Swansea to cheer me up on the difficult days.—[Interruption.]

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly will.

Mr Duncan Smith: While the hon. Lady gets her breath back, can I just say that many Conservative Members absolutely and totally support her? We think that she has been marvellous in running this campaign, and we are urging our Government to act on her behalf.

Carolyn Harris: Thank you.

On the wall of my office, there are invitations for meetings, receptions and dinners—mostly to remind me where I need to be, and when. Among all that sits a letter, which has probably been pinned up longer than anything else. That letter is on Downing Street headed notepaper, signed by the Prime Minister and dated 10 April 2018. In that letter, the Prime Minister promises that she will introduce a children’s funeral fund. It hurts me greatly that more than a year after I received the letter, it still hangs on my wall as unfinished business.

I do not need to tell Members my story, because they have all heard it many times before.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend has been a sturdy campaigner for this cause for a long time. I am glad the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) recognises what a great champion she has been for such a great cause. I wish her every success in future.

Carolyn Harris: Thank you.

What I will tell the House is that nothing prepares you for the loss of a child. The devastation is unimaginable for anyone who has not experienced it. It almost destroyed me, and if it were not for the fact that Martin’s brother, Stuart, who is now a strapping 34-year-old, still needed his mam to look after him, who knows where my life would have ended. It is almost certain that my passion, my determination and my absolute desire to help those in vulnerable positions have somehow been born out of my grief.

It was not easy standing in the Chamber and sharing my own heartbreak, but it was something that I knew I had to do. Thirteen months ago, the Prime Minister finally announced that she would be introducing a children’s funeral fund in memory of Martin, and I felt like my pain would at least benefit other people, so it saddens me to stand here today, more than a year after that announcement, to ask again for this fund to be put in place.

There are others in the Chamber who will understand the pain that I speak about; in particular, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) will be able to relate to what I have said. I know that, regardless of political loyalty, he sees the children’s funeral fund as a desperately needed emergency provision.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con) indicated assent.

Carolyn Harris: The Welsh Labour Government have implemented the fund. The Scottish Government have implemented the fund. Councils across Northern Ireland have implemented the fund. I really do appreciate that the Minister has been supportive of my ask, and I actually feel quite sorry for him that he has to respond to me and explain why England has not followed the rest of the UK.

Let me describe two incidents that have happened today. I have had an email from parents not 100 miles from here whose three-month-old baby is in a mortuary, and they are unable to take the baby out of there because they do not have the money to pay the local authority fees. To make the comparison with Wales, I also had an email from Tŷ Hafan, a Welsh children’s hospice, to tell me that because of the Welsh children’s funeral fund, parents can now afford headstones, which would not have been affordable if they had had to pay for the funerals. That is the difference that the fund makes.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The hon. Lady’s bravery is remarkable and it is a privilege to be here to show support for the cause that she has championed. We should not have to be. The example she gives is that of just one of many families who have suffered the extraordinary pain and trauma of losing a child, with many of them having suffered financial sacrifices because their children had long-term conditions. Then, to add insult to injury, they are unable to pay for a funeral. That is why this change must come urgently and Conservative Members will do everything on our side to make sure that that happens.

Carolyn Harris: Thank you very much.

In the press release last year when the introduction of the fund was first announced, Downing Street estimated that around 4,350 children die under the age of 18 each year in England, leaving grieving parents facing thousands in council fees for burial or cremation costs. That same press release went on to quote the Prime Minister saying: “No parent should ever have to endure the unbearable loss of a child—a loss that no amount of time will ever truly heal. But in the raw pain of immediate loss, it cannot be right that grieving parents should have to worry about how to meet the funeral costs for a child they hoped to see grow into adulthood... That is why I have asked for the Children’s Funeral Fund to be set up in England. For Carolyn, in memory of her son Martin, and in support of all those parents overwhelmed by such harrowing loss.”
I remember at the time thanking the Prime Minister for showing compassion and helping to provide a glimmer of light in the darkness that surrounds families when a child dies. I did not expect more than a year later to be waiting for her to honour the commitment she made. I am struggling even to find the words for how disappointed and hurt I am that we have yet to see the fund become a reality.

Every day, 12 families face this heartbreak. That means that, since this promise was made, 4,600 families will have had to find the money for their child’s funeral.

Fair Funerals UK estimates that the average cost of a cremation is £3,596, while that of a burial is £4,561. That is a lot of money for families to find.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am deeply sorry that my hon. Friend has had to call this Adjournment debate today because of the failure of the Prime Minister to keep her promise. She mentioned the cost of a burial. For some parents of particular religions, a burial is the only option for them, and they cannot move their child from the mortuary to the undertaker without having the funds in place. Does she agree that there are particular impacts on particular communities across England because of the absence of the fund?

Carolyn Harris: I totally appreciate my hon. Friend’s intervention, but the pain is just as painful regardless of religion or culture.

As parents, we all want to give our children the very best that we can. In death, that becomes even more important. When a dignified funeral is the very last gift that a parent can give their child, money should not be a barrier, but sadly, at around £4,000 for a funeral, it really is.

Anouncing that a fund will be introduced and then holding back from providing the money was unacceptably cruel to many parents, including to me. The up-front fees payable to the local authority and a coffin are the two necessities that no funeral can take place without. In these circumstances—without funds, but keeping everything basic—the money to cover those two essentials would allow parents to bury their children without cost.

All we ask for is that every parent be given the compassion and respect that they deserve to help them through their grief. The Prime Minister has offered a vague promise of the summer, and I hope that she is true to her word. This summer, it will be 30 years since I lost Martin. Thirty years is a lifetime, yet some days it feels like it was only yesterday. The pain does not get any better; it is still very raw. I miss that little boy so much and my heart breaks that I will never see the man that he was meant to be.

The Prime Minister made a promise. She promised to deliver the fund for Martin. She needs to honour that promise for my little boy, for me and for every other parent who faces the unbearable heartbreak of losing a child.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this hugely important debate. It gives me the opportunity to update the House and to reaffirm the commitment made by the Prime Minister on something of huge importance, not only to this House but across our country.

Before I begin, I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her tireless campaigning on this important issue, which, as she says, touches the lives of many families. As she has so incredibly movingly reminded us today, she has herself suffered the tragic loss of a child—her son, Martin, who I appreciate will always be her little boy—and I feel deeply for her.

It is to the hon. Lady’s outstanding credit that she has been willing and able to draw on that most painful of experiences to press for so positive and important a measure. Her constituents and this House should be incredibly proud to have someone such as her representing them and as a Member of our legislature. I am very proud to say that, having got to know her since I have been in this House, but particularly since last year when I took up ministerial office, I can begin to call her a friend as well.

I know that many hon. Members across this House have supported the hon. Lady in her endeavours. It is right that I mention my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who is now also the junior Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions with responsibility for this area—jointly with us in the Ministry of Justice. When it comes to delivering this, I hope she will accept that she would struggle to find two junior Ministers more determined and willing to deliver for her, both because it is the right thing to do for our country and because it is the right thing to do for her and for many other parents across the country. I pay tribute to the work of a number of campaigners and organisations across the country, and to bereaved parents who, like the hon. Lady, have summoned up the courage—however hard that is—to speak up and join this campaign.

The commitment to develop a children’s funeral fund for England was announced by the Prime Minister at Easter last year. As she said in that announcement, no parent should ever have to endure the unbearable loss of a child. Although nothing can ever truly heal the pain of such a loss, as the hon. Lady has shown, we must recognise that, as the Prime Minister said, in the darkest moment of any parent’s life there can still be a little light if there is the support and care that they need. The Government are committed to ensuring that that support exists for those who lose a child. I have known this Prime Minister for a very long time, and while she has many priorities, there are some that are particularly important and personal to her, which run through everything she tries to do, and I think that her personal commitment on this issue is very much there.

The children’s funeral fund is being established in recognition of the fact that it cannot be right for grieving parents to have to worry about meeting the cost of burying or cremating their child. It is in memory of the hon. Lady’s son Martin, and in support and memory of all parents who experience this most painful and tragic of losses. The Prime Minister made the commitment to establish this scheme. Under the scheme, parents will no longer have to meet the costs of burial or cremation. These will instead be met by Government funding.
meaning that parents will no longer be subject to the sometimes significant variation in charges across the country. The hon. Lady also highlighted the elements that she considers the basic essentials that need to be covered: the fees from the local authority and others, and the coffin. I share her view.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): I echo everything that everybody has said. I also consider the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) a friend. She has dealt with this campaign with what we Welsh would call hwyl, and she is to be congratulated on that. When these final decisions are being taken, may I just urge the Minister to bear in mind the phraseology that the hon. Lady used—that this is the last gift of a parent to a dead child? It is not just a pounds, shillings and pence coffin and headstone; it is the whole emotional issue. If we keep that in mind, we will get the right outcome.

**Edward Argar**: As ever, my hon. Friend puts his point simply but eloquently, and he is absolutely right about the prism through which we should be looking at this matter.

The scheme that we are envisaging will not just bring England into line with broadly comparable arrangements in Wales and Scotland. I am keen that we go a bit beyond that where we can. The children’s funeral fund will complement other measures to support grieving parents, including the social fund funeral expenses payment scheme and the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, which was enacted last September. But I do understand that, alongside the welcome for the fund and across both sides of this House, hon. Members and others clearly and rightly want to see the scheme in place as soon as possible, and to be reassured of the continued commitment to and progress towards that.

As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said on 6 February at Prime Minister’s questions, it is important that we get this right. We have therefore been working hard across Government to identify the most effective way to deliver the fund. For all the clear simplicity of what it seeks to do, it is none the less a complex and challenging policy legislatively. For that reason, I have been working hard across Government to ensure that it is legal, and a strong and robust delivery mechanism to deliver the fund this summer.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend knows—as do you, Mr Speaker—that, inspired by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), I have been a champion of this fund in, for example, Walsall around the provision of coffins. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has taken a very close interest in it. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) has, I believe, just become champion for the all-party parliamentary group on pregnancy and infant loss, and I will continue to be active on this. He is absolutely right. We do need to get the scheme right. We need to make it effective and legal, but as simple as we can. We are working to devise a comprehensive publicity programme to ensure that both the funeral sector and, of course, bereaved families are fully informed and fully understand how the fund will work, and how they can access it, in advance of its launch.

**Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Could not the complexity be simplified if we just asked what they did in Scotland and Wales and replicated it? If it can be done speedily in Scotland and Wales, and in local authorities in Northern Ireland, why can it not be done speedily here, after the long and fantastic campaigning of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris)?

**Edward Argar**: I am grateful to my right hon. Gentleman. He is right that we can draw on the lessons from the devolved Administrations, and I will touch on that subsequently. However, there are different arrangements in, for example, Wales around the provision of coffins. I agree with the hon. Member for Swansea East that that is an essential part of this. We are looking to see if we can bring that within the scheme in a way different from that used in Wales. There are differences, and there is also a different legislative context given the devolution settlement—I will touch on that in a minute. I entirely accept that for those dealing with the terrible burden of bereavement, progress has been slow. I want to reassure the House that, as the Prime Minister announced in the House on 27 February, work is on track in each of the areas I mentioned: a clear policy, a legislative vehicle to ensure that it is legal, and a strong and robust delivery mechanism to deliver the fund this summer.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for the work that she has done in this area, which is really second to none. In November last year, I sat in the living room of one of my constituents as she lay on her sofa stricken by grief having lost her 16-year-old son to knife crime. Her grief was compounded by the family’s inability to pay for the funeral that she wanted to give her son. Will the Minister accept that with every passing week, there is more urgency to this issue and to delivering this money so that it can benefit families who are facing a situation than none of us would wish on anyone?

**Edward Argar**: I want to give at this Dispatch Box a very clear and succinct answer: I agree entirely with the point that the hon. Lady makes. I will come on in a moment to what I have been doing to take a close and personal interest in making sure that this is driven at pace.

**Mr Duncan Smith**: I mean my hon. Friend no criticism, because I am a huge supporter of his—I think he is doing a great job, as is the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who I am incredibly pleased to see on the Front Bench—but I just want to press him slightly on this. Having sat in government for six years
and run a Department, I know that when you really want to, you can get these things done—excuse my language, Mr Speaker—pretty damn quickly, so I simply say to him that there may be something else that has been blocking this. If it sits in the Treasury, then I would hope that he might indicate that, because he will find that the pressure on the Treasury should be enormous right now. These are not large numbers in economic terms but they are large in human terms. I simply say to him that if anybody is saying that this is an unjustified cost, I promise him that I will give him every support I can, as I have before, to chase the Treasury on this matter. It should be told: do it now.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is right to highlight that it is not about numbers; every single individual matters. I am clear that we must deliver on this commitment. This should not and will not be about the money. I hope that all Government Departments—including the Department for Work and Pensions and, I am sure, Her Majesty’s Treasury—will wish to play their full role in ensuring that this is delivered expeditiously and properly.

Since I assumed responsibility for this, my officials have been working hard to develop both the necessary legislative vehicle and a delivery mechanism to ensure that it works on the ground. That has involved detailed discussions with the devolved Administrations, which the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) asked about, to ensure that we learn from them, that we do not inadvertently create a cross-border gap in provision and that everyone has coverage.

More than that, as I alluded to earlier, this has required close working across Government to ensure that the children’s funeral fund is compatible and works well alongside other state provision and, importantly, that it fully fulfils the vision for the scheme of the Prime Minister and the hon. Member for Swansea East. To reflect that, our intention is that provision should be universal and free at the point of need.

As I mentioned, this work has been complex. However, I want to reassure the House that we are very close to putting the final details in place for all three elements. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Bulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and others, I expect and am sure that all Departments will be equally seized of the importance of delivering this, and I reassure her that the priority I attach to this means that I have weekly project meetings with the officials delivering it and receive daily progress updates on each of the outstanding elements, so clear am I in my determination to deliver this.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I do not doubt for one second the Minister’s sincerity, or indeed that of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). The Minister has mentioned the summer and says he is having weekly meetings, but can he set out a more definitive timetable for when this will be implemented? “Summer” could be any time from June to September. It would give some reassurance to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East and the families if we had a more detailed date or a month.

Edward Argar: I cannot give a detailed date. The hon. Gentleman, as a savvy Whip, will read into this what he will. I have said that this will require a legislative vehicle, and given my determination to do this for the summer and given that the House would need to be sitting to deliver on that, that might give him an indication of my intention.

Sir John Hayes: I want the Minister to know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), myself and, I hope, the hon. Member for Swansea East, will be going to see the Treasury Minister next week. I have just texted him to tell him.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for updating the House on that.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East and others involved in this. What we are hearing from the Minister about how government works across England is really alarming. The fact that the Prime Minister driving a policy change is so complicated in England, whereas our friends and colleagues across the United Kingdom can make these decisions more quickly, is a lesson for Government in how England is represented in this place. I hope that lessons about the complexities through which the Minister has had to drive this will be learned for other policy areas.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but I would say to her that, as I mentioned earlier, we are not seeking simply to replicate what has been done by the devolved Administrations. We are looking at other aspects and seeing whether there are ways in which we might go a bit further. That does add complexity, so it is not exactly replicating something that is already there. However, she makes her point, as ever, courteously but forcefully.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Edward Argar: I will not, I am afraid, because I am very conscious of time, and I want to conclude and wind up this debate properly.

I will endeavour to keep the House updated on progress—I know the interest in the House—and I will seek to provide more detailed information on both policy questions and delivery and, where I can, on the legislative timing as soon as I am able to do so. I would like once again to thank the hon. Member for Swansea East and other contributors to today’s debate. No parent ever expects to bury their child, but the sad reality is that it happens, and perhaps more often than many of us realise or wish to acknowledge. For those who suffer such a tragic loss, the emotional burden, as she has said, is unimaginable. It is simply not right that, in addition, families should have to worry about what is probably an unexpected and, for some, totally unmanageable financial burden.

My commitment, the Prime Minister’s commitment and that, I believe, of Members on both sides of the House is clear. Let us make the hon. Lady’s vision a reality in our communities. We will deliver on the Prime Minister’s commitment, we will finish that unfinished business this summer, we will give bereaved parents the support they need, and we will do it swiftly and effectively in tribute to all of them and to the hon. Lady.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.
Recall of MPs Act 2015: Member for Peterborough

Text of the notification received by the Speaker:

Recall Petition 2019—Public Notice of Outcome of Petition

Petition to Remove the MP for Peterborough, Fiona Onasanya

Petition signing period	Tuesday, 19 March 2019 to 01 May 2019
Constituency	Peterborough
Recall condition
The relevant recall condition was due to Fiona Onasanya MP being convicted of perverting the course of justice and sentenced to be imprisoned for 3 months and no appeal being upheld (as per section 1(3) of the Recall of MPs Act 2015).
Petition successful	Yes

Number of electors eligible to sign the petition	69673
Number of electors who validly signed the petition	19261
Percentage of electors who validly signed the petition	27.64%
Number of rejected signing sheets due to:
No official mark	0
Unmarked or void for uncertainty	62
Total number of rejected signing sheets	62

Name: Gillian Beasley (Petition Officer)
Date: 01 May 2019
House of Commons

Thursday 2 May 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

New Writ

Ordered,

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 Borough constituency of Peterborough in the room of Fiona Oluyinka Onasanya, against whom since her election for the said Borough constituency a recall petition has been successful.—(Mr Nicholas Brown.)

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Great Western Main Line

1. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What progress has he made on the electrification of the Great Western main line.

Andrew Jones: We have so far electrified the Great Western main line as far as Newbury, Bristol Parkway and Chippenham, and electrification to Cardiff is progressing towards delivery by November this year.

Jessica Morden: I certainly welcome the electrification work in south Wales, although it should have gone through to Swansea, but what is the Department doing to ensure that Network Rail works closely with communities such as Magor in my constituency, which is right on the line, to ensure that where work does have a big impact on residents it listens, reacts to problems and compensates accordingly?

Andrew Jones: I cannot comment on the specifics of that community, but I will take that up with Network Rail on the hon. Lady’s behalf. As a general principle, I raise, and have raised repeatedly, with Network Rail how community engagement and communication are absolutely critical for all communities along the lines they serve.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The electrification of the main line railway through Devon and Cornwall would be massively challenging and hugely disruptive because of the geography, with a number of bridges, tunnels and steep inclines. Does the Minister share my view that the best way forward for places like Devon and Cornwall is to use bimodal trains that make use of electrification where available, but then have clean diesel engines where electrification is not possible?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very wise point. Electrification has always been part of the answer to improve the network, its environmental performance and its running capability, but it will not be the right answer on every single occasion. There will be occasions where electrification provides no significant journey time savings, yet has a significant capital cost. In those situations, we should seek to get the benefits via technology and the technology in the rolling stock. I agree with my hon. Friend.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), my constituents, particularly those in Lawrence Hill, one of the most challenging parts of my constituency, had to endure months of inconvenience as the electrification work was carried out. To add insult to that injury, we are not even getting electrification to Bristol Temple Meads. They have to put up with the inconvenience without the electrification. What compensation, assistance or help can the Secretary of State or the Government give to my constituents in Lawrence Hill?

Andrew Jones: The issue of compensation when we do works on either the railways or the roads is raised repeatedly, but it would simply just add to the cost of projects. I recognise that we cannot work on the roads or the rails without causing some disruption. That should be minimised. As I said to the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), we should be working to communicate and collaborate with communities. In terms of compensation, there is no plan to change any of the current arrangements, but I just remind her that the services at the end of the work will result in the best ever services from Bristol.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Minister may be aware that the Welsh Affairs Committee reported on the cancellation of electrification to Swansea and pointed out that although Wales has 11% of the UK’s rail network it receives 1.5% of rail investment. Does the Minister not agree that that disparity needs to be addressed?

Andrew Jones: We are keen to see investment right across our network. I know the hon. Gentleman has campaigned for a variety of infrastructure investments—indeed, we had a Westminster Hall debate on this subject only a few weeks ago—but we are investing at a record level. The budget for England and Wales for control period 6, which started last month, is £48 billion. That money is being spent on upgrading, maintaining and renewing our network. As proposals come forward for inclusion within schemes, they should of course be based on merit. I look forward to working with Welsh colleagues to see what happens.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is extremely welcome that a scheme is now being developed for electrification to Market Harborough. Can the Minister say when further decisions will be taken about exactly when that will happen?
Andrew Jones: I cannot say exactly when without going off and checking, but I will of course do that and get back to my hon. Friend with a more detailed answer.

Skipton to Colne Rail Link

2. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of restoring the rail link between Skipton and Colne. [910664]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): An initial feasibility study carried out in partnership with Transport for the North was completed in December 2018. We are now working to assess the scheme to ensure that it can be affordable, will attract sufficient traffic and is part of the right long-term solution for the cross-Pennine rail routes. The results of that work, which we expect to receive later this year, will inform the decision about taking the scheme forward.

John Grogan: Does the Minister agree that restoring the line would have the advantage of providing an important new freight link across the Pennines, as well as a passenger link? Will he agree to publish the feasibility study, so that Network Rail's £800 million cost estimate can be scrutinised and, probably, brought down considerably?

Chris Grayling: Of course if the scheme is to go forward, it has to be at an affordable price. It is part of the Government's broader strategy to improve connections between east Lancashire and West Yorkshire, and I commend those Members who have made such a powerful case for the improvement of those routes—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), at the other end in West Yorkshire, who has talked about the importance of those routes.

I also believe it is of fundamental importance that we have a proper freight route across the Pennines, as well as passenger services for local communities in those areas, so that we can provide shorter journey times from ports on the east and west coasts. That, to my mind, is the central part of this work.

Seating-only Policies: Capacity and Ticket Prices

3. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on (a) capacity and (b) ticket prices on the rail network at peak times in the event of the introduction of seating-only policies.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Department has made no recent assessment of the potential effect on (a) capacity and (b) ticket prices on the rail network at assessment he has made of the potential effect on (a) its submission to the Williams rail review, including seating-only services. Those will of course be considered by Mr Williams and his team as their work progresses.

Mr Cunningham: When do the Minister or his officials propose to have discussions with Virgin Trains? There is a great deal of concern that this could affect Virgin employees and, equally, pensioners' freedom to travel, so I hope the Minister will discuss this with Virgin.

Andrew Jones: I look forward to the Williams review's response to Virgin's submission. I see Virgin's point, but I have to say that the turn-up-and-go principle that has always been part of our rail network is important and, I think, valued by passengers. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about the impact on passengers and those who work on the railways, but the underlying turn-up-and-go principle is a fundamental part of our rail network, and we would only challenge that with extreme care.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Far too many rail passengers have to stand, which is especially inconvenient for those on lengthy journeys. Many other countries successfully run double-decker trains. Why do we not, with a bit of vision and ambition, introduce double-decker trains on our network?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion. Our challenge is that we have a very old infrastructure, including many cuttings, tunnels and bridges. Cuttings are perhaps less of a problem, but the tunnels and bridges would be more of a challenge. The height capacity, which also impacts on freight, is being considered, but the way to deliver the capacity that my hon. Friend seeks for his constituents and that we want is perhaps not through that route, which would require huge interventions and a large capital budget, but to use other forms of technology and development.

Midland Main Line Franchise

4. Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Where the trains for the new franchise for midland main line will be made; and what the timetable is for the delivery of those trains. [910667]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Brand-new trains capable of operating under electric and diesel power will be introduced into service on the midland main line from 2022. I hope and expect the first train to be tested in 2021. I must leave the announcement on the manufacture of the new trains to the operator, but my hon. Friend knows that I have signalled on many occasions since becoming Secretary of State how committed I am to seeing more trains manufactured in the United Kingdom.

Mrs Latham: How many new trains and carriages will be produced, and how many current ones will be refurbished?

Chris Grayling: The inter-city fleet will be entirely new, which will be a great bonus to travellers on that route. We expect to see more seats and a brand-new fleet of trains, which is really important as we go through the biggest upgrade to the midland main line since the Victorian age. I cannot immediately recall the operator's plans for the route from Kettering—serving the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone)—but they will no doubt set out the detail of those trains, which will be new commuter electric services down from those stations, for local Members shortly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State knows, we are a great manufacturing nation with the finest technology. Surely, after last night's
wonderful decision on climate change, we should think about how we can make more things in this country, without cheating the public. The Hitachi trains will not be made here, although they will be assembled here. When can we revive the train manufacturing sector in this country?

Chris Grayling: The more we build in this country, the more we invest in research and development. In the north-east, we are seeing more of Hitachi’s capabilities coming to the United Kingdom. The same applies to CAF in south Wales and, in particular, to the great success of Bombardier in Derby. Bombardier currently has a huge amount of work, and is delivering new trains throughout the network. However, I am with the hon. Gentleman: I want more to be done in the United Kingdom. As we move further into the 2020s, I am very committed to ensuring that as much as possible of the new rolling stock that we are expecting is built in the UK.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My question relates to fair and consistent treatment of bidders. Given that the Department has confirmed that all three bidders for the East Midlands franchise were non-compliant, why were only Stagecoach and Arriva disqualified from the competition?

Chris Grayling: Because it is not the case that all three bidders were non-compliant.

Rachael Maskell: Well, that is certainly not what the Secretary of State’s Department is saying. He withheld sensitive market information between 1 and 9 April when disqualifying Stagecoach from the South Eastern and West Coast Partnership competitions, thus demonstrating that his interference further discredits the franchising process. Have any of the bidders for the other rail franchise competitions submitted non-compliant bids, and have they been disqualified? If so, why has the information not been made public?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid that the hon. Lady’s question is based on a totally false premise. She is incorrectly accusing me of interference, and she is incorrectly making assertions about non-compliant bids that are simply inaccurate.

Leaving the EU: Port Delays

5. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What plans has he to minimise delays at UK ports after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My Department is working closely with the Border Delivery Group to help to ensure that trade will continue to flow with minimum friction at UK ports. We are also continuing to liaise closely with the devolved Administrations.

Dr Whitford: During the farce of the ferry company with no ferries, and indeed no harbours, the Secretary of State claimed that no taxpayers’ money would be spent on services that were not required. However, the National Audit Office has reported that cancelling the other no-deal ferry services that were contracted to start on 29 March will actually cost £56 million. Did the Secretary of State not understand the contracts that he was signing, or did he not even read them?

Ms Ghani: That was another question with some flaws in it. First, no taxpayers’ money was paid to Seaborne. In view of the article 50 extension, the Government are reviewing no-deal contingency planning, and have decided to terminate the contract with Brittany Ferries and DFDS. It is right for us to ensure that we have done everything that we can in the event of a no-deal scenario. We had to take out an insurance policy, which is why the other contracts were provided. The cost of terminating those contracts will be £43.8 million, but had we delayed the termination, it would have been an extra £10 million. I remind the House that this is just 1% of no-deal planning. If the hon. Lady is concerned about the cost and about no-deal planning, I suggest that she vote for the deal.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): You will realise, Mr Speaker, that when we leave this dreadful European Union, there will be a massive expansion in trade as we increase exports all over the world. Has the Minister—this excellent Minister—planned an expansion of the ports so that we can deal with that increased trade?

Ms Ghani: Once again, my hon. Friend is waving the flag for the United Kingdom. We have indeed put together a 30-year maritime strategy called Maritime 2050, which will help to deliver the fantastic maritime nation that we were before we joined the EU. It is a great opportunity to promote again the hard work undertaken by our ports, including preparing for the possibility of— [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am listening to the flow of the Minister’s eloquence and the eloquence of her flow, but meanwhile the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) is chuntering from a sedentary position to no obvious benefit or purpose; the only thing I can detect is some muttering about one flag rather than another flag. The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to speak on his feet with force and Demosthenian eloquence in due course.

Ms Ghani: I was just going to end by talking about the fantastic work our ports do, including in preparing for no deal, and I look forward to working with them as we increase trade post Brexit.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Transport Minister in the Lords said yesterday that she did not rule out our having a no-deal scenario in October and therefore we could potentially be exactly where we are now later in the year. Can the Minister assure me that the ferry companies will not get double-bubble if that unfortunate situation occurs?

Ms Ghani: We have to prepare for no deal; it is the default position of triggering article 50. If the right hon. Gentleman has any concerns about the impact of no deal, I would ask him to vote for the deal at the next opportunity.
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): So far we have had a contract with a company with no ships and illegal procurement practices, which resulted in Eurotunnel winning £33 million in compensation, and then the Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and tells us the £50-odd million cancellation of the current services is the right thing to do as part of the Brexit preparations. Now we also learn that P&O is suing the Department. When did the Minister learn of its action? Will this go through the courts, or will there be another £33 million cave-in as apparently such sums do not matter as they only represent a small percentage of the overall figure?

Ms Ghani: I am not going to comment on any procedures taking place in respect of legal action, but if the hon. Gentleman really is concerned about no-deal planning, he cannot in one breath say we have not prepared enough and in the next say we have prepared and now we have to deal with the consequences. If the hon. Gentleman is concerned about no deal, I suggest he think about voting for the deal. It was absolutely right that we respected the needs across Whitehall and procured freight capacity, including for urgent medical equipment and medicines that may or may not be needed; it was the right and responsible thing to do.

Alan Brown: I suggest that the Minister should change the record: why should we vote for a deal that we think is a bad deal just to cover up this Government’s incompetence? We have had 89 lorries mimicking the rail franchising system. What assessment he has made of the future viability of the Rail Franchising System

Mr Sweeney: Well, the chair of that review has just said that the franchising system is not fit for purpose. In the light of that, does the Secretary of State not agree with Opposition Members that privatisation has been a litany of failure, that the fragmentation of the network has meant the coherence of the passenger-led system has been destroyed and that we need to have a reintegrated railway system under democratic control? Is that not the future for the railway system in this country?

Chris Grayling: The Labour party is very clear that it wants to recreate British Rail, and it has every right to argue for that—[Interruption.] Labour Members say no, but that is their policy. I remember the days of British Rail. It was a state-run railway on which routes were closed, services were cut and the trains were old and outdated. Today, we have a railway that carries far more trains. The challenges that we face are challenges of success, not failure.

Justine Greening: Of course, the Transport Secretary is right in many respects. In my own community, Putney station needs a second entrance to cope with the overcrowding, which is a sign of how important it is for commuters every day. Will he give us an update on this? He very helpfully visited the station last year, and he has described getting a second entrance as a second win. Will he update us on his discussions with Network Rail to help to move that project forward?

Chris Grayling: Since my right hon. Friend and I visited her station, I have discussed the issue with my Department and with Network Rail. In the past month, we have entered the new rail control investment period, which will involve £48 billion—a record level of investment in the railways—including a number of hundreds of millions of pounds to invest in stations and improvements. I absolutely accept, and I think we all believe, that particularly at busy stations in and around our commuter centres—which Putney certainly is—we will need such improvements. She knows that I am very sympathetic to what we need to do there.

Martin Vickers: Does the Secretary of State agree that, when we embark on a new franchising system, one of the considerations needs to be the provision of services not just on the main arterial routes but on the secondary routes—such as a direct service from King’s Cross to Cleethorpes?

Chris Grayling: This is one of the things we need to achieve for the future. There is demand for extra services all round the country, and to release that demand, we need to continue to invest in capacity. That is what we are going to be doing in the next control period. We will also need to use smart technology such as digital signalling to increase the number of train paths, and we will of
course need to expand the network, which is what the HS2 project is all about. I absolutely understand and share my hon. Friend’s ambition.

Shipley Eastern Bypass

7. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Bradford Council on a Shipley eastern bypass. [910674]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I must apologise to you, Mr Speaker, because I am not possessed of either a Demosthenic or a Ciceroonian eloquence, but what I can do is focus the House’s attention on this perfectly formed and important local question regarding Bradford Council’s discussions on a Shipley eastern bypass. My hon. Friend has been a highly effective campaigner for this project, and as he will know, we have supported it within my Department. My officials remain in regular contact with officers from Bradford Metropolitan District Council. The council will need to provide a detailed business case for the Department to review to take forward plans for the road scheme, and my officials are advising the council on how to develop its business case.

Mr Speaker: Frankly, the Minister is altogether too modest. However, it is my own firm conviction, based on observing the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for the past 14 years, that he combines the qualities of both those illustrious orators.

Philip Davies: You are very kind, Mr Speaker, but I am not sure that we would want a Division on that proposition. As the Minister has made clear, the Government have paid for a feasibility study to be carried out, for which I am extremely grateful, but since then, not a fat lot seems to have happened at the Bradford Council end. So when does he expect to see the feasibility study completed by Bradford Council so that we can crack on with delivering this vital scheme?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus attention on the council, because it is with the council that the situation presently lies. Bradford Metropolitan District Council has said that, by November this year, it will submit a strategic outline business case looking at how to resolve congestion issues in Shipley. The Department will then consider it and provide recommendations to Ministers.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am not altogether sure of the link between Brecon and Radnorshire and the Shipley eastern bypass, but I have a feeling that I am about to be enlightened by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies).

Chris Davies: All will be revealed, Mr Speaker. Has my hon. Friend the Minister had any recent discussions with the Welsh Government over the urgent need for the M4 relief road, which will provide quicker and better access from Wales to Shipley and the rest of the UK?

Jesse Norman: How unwise I was to have considered this a tightly focused question. I had entirely failed to understand the national implications for this proposal across Wales and England. My officials remain in close discussions not merely with Highways England about the M4 but with the Welsh Government about the strategic road network. I therefore have no doubt that once the great Shipley bypass has been constructed, access from Wales will be as uninterrupted as my hon. Friend would wish it to be.

Dartford Crossing: Revenue

8. Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): What the net revenue income has been from the Dartford crossing since construction debt relating to that crossing was repaid. [910678]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Before 31 March 2003, tolls from the Dartford crossing financed the construction of the QE2 bridge, paid down pre-existing debts and provided a future maintenance fund. After 1 April 2003, a charging scheme to manage demand was introduced at the crossing, reflecting research suggesting that if the tolls were lifted, demand would be 17% higher and congestion would worsen accordingly. To respond directly to the hon. Lady’s question, the user charges have raised a net income of £669 million in the period 2003-14 to 2017-18, which has been reinvested in transport.

Teresa Pearce: I thank the Minister for his response, but according to my reading of the legislation and the accounts, the income from the Dartford crossing is paid to the Department for Transport with no ring fence, so it can be spent anywhere on anything transport related. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case? Given the crossing’s adverse effect on Bexley and Dartford residents in terms of air pollution, congestion, extended journey times and often complete gridlock—the hospital is on one side of the Dartford bridge and residents are on the other—what percentage of the income has been and will be spent on improving transport for those residents?

Jesse Norman: I can confirm that all the money raised is reinvested into transport, and the benefits of that are felt locally through the charge, which reduces congestion and therefore improves air quality. Of course, a vastly greater sum is projected to be invested in the lower Thames crossing, which is currently under way and will relieve significant burdens on her local community.

Bus Journeys

9. Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of journeys taken by bus. [910679]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Local bus journeys remain central to transport choices, accounting for around 59% of all public transport journeys. The number of local bus passenger journeys in England has fallen since the 1950s to 4.36 billion in the year ending March 2018.
Mr Hepburn: Since 2010, public funding for bus services has been cut by 45%, leading to a 20% decrease in passenger journeys. At the same time, bus operators have pocketed £1.5 billion in profits. Does the Minister think that the country and commuters are getting a good deal?

Ms Ghani: Well, bus patronage differs up and down the country, as does the number of miles covered by buses. When local authorities have good partnerships with bus companies, the number of bus passengers across all age groups tends to be higher. It is fundamental to note that the one place where bus miles are going down is in Labour-led Wales.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Further to that point, does the Minister agree that we should congratulate Henley Town Council on its provision of a Saturday bus service, which is increasing bus journeys around the town, particularly for the vulnerable?

Ms Ghani: Once again, my hon. Friend is a true champion of his constituency, and he refers specifically to Henley Town Council. When a council has a good relationship and partnership with a bus operating company, decisions about where and how buses should run can be made close to home to ensure that services are run how passengers want. I want buses to be the most convenient, accessible and greenest form of transport across our country. This is not just about funding; it is about good relationships between local authorities and bus operating companies.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn) made an important point. Bus services are in deep crisis: funding has been slashed by £645 million a year in real terms since 2010; over 3,000 routes have been cut; and fares have soared by 2.5 times the increase in wages. It is therefore hardly surprising that passenger numbers have fallen by 10% since 2010. Will the Minister now apologise to the millions of pensioners, young people and commuters who rely on our buses?

Ms Ghani: Bus passenger numbers vary across the country, and I do not think it is appropriate for the hon. Gentleman just to whitewash bus services as if they were one national service. He should realise that bus passenger numbers are up by 15% in Bristol and by 38% in Poole, and bus passenger numbers are up among young people in Liverpool as well. Over £1 billion is spent on bus services, with some going directly to local authorities and some going to bus operating companies.

When the hon. Gentleman talks about the cost of a bus journey, it is important to remember that, every year, the cost went up three times as fast under the Labour Government than it ever has under this Government. Under Labour Governments, the crisis in our bus services is damaging our communities, particularly the young, the old and people with disabilities.

Our councils stand ready to help where this Government have failed. Indeed, the Minister references the work done by some excellent Labour councils across the country. On local election day, can she tell the House why the Government will not allow all local authorities the powers to regulate bus services and, indeed, to set up new council-run bus companies? Both measures have led to much-improved services across the country.

Ms Ghani: I can tell the House, on local election day, that we have put in place legislation under the Bus Services Act 2017 to allow local authorities to manage those partnerships with their bus companies to ensure that they deliver good value and good services locally. All local authorities need to do is to work on business plans and timetabling and they can bring those partnerships forward. They have not done that yet.

Rail Punctuality

10. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on improving rail punctuality.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Government take performance seriously and understand it is crucial to passengers and freight users, which is why we agreed a Network Rail settlement for England and Wales of £47.9 billion for control period 6 specifically aimed at maintaining and renewing the railway to improve reliability and punctuality for all rail users. The budget in Scotland is £4.85 billion, and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to make similar representations to the Scottish Government, who have devolved control of railway infrastructure funding in Scotland.

Patrick Grady: I am sure the Minister and the whole House will want to welcome Monday’s launch of the new sleeper stock on the Caledonian Sleeper service. I recommend the service to you, Mr Speaker, should you ever want to come and visit us up in Glasgow.

Of course, the first services were slightly hampered by delays and a fall in punctuality as a result of signal failures and problems with Network Rail. Given the success, the ambition and the vision that the Scottish Government have shown with this new sleeper service, should they not now also have the power devolved to control the whole of Network Rail so that we can deal with some of these punctuality issues?

Andrew Jones: The whole of Network Rail would include England and Wales, which might be a stretch for the Scottish Government. I obviously also welcome the arrival of the Caledonian Sleeper. I have not seen the service yet, but I understand it is fantastic and I look forward to seeing it, and potentially even using it.

On how this is structured, the Scottish Government, as they should, have control of the spending north of the border in Scotland. I am keen to see devolution across our rail network. Local solutions to local problems is a merit that we should be considering.

I just point out that we have had a good run on punctuality over the last few months in the UK. Performance obviously needs to be constantly improved but, when I checked this morning, 95% of trains were
on time, including 94% of trains in Scotland. That is a strong performance from ScotRail and a strong performance across our whole network.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Punctuality is often viewed through the prism of the big strategic journeys, but may I urge my hon. Friend also to take into account, when considering how to improve punctuality and bringing pressure so to do on the operators, those small, intercounty and over county boundary journeys that are often so important to students and workers? I think particularly of those from Gillingham in my constituency through to either Salisbury or back to Dorchester—those journeys are vital to the local economy, and the service is not quite good enough.

Mr Speaker: I am wondering whether the Minister is going to offer to sample the service—

Simon Hoare: I hope he does.

Mr Speaker: Indeed. But it is not a sleeper service, so he will have to be awake.

Andrew Jones: I do sometimes fall asleep on the trains at the end of the week if I am heading north again. I was not planning such a visit, but I am always happy to visit and I would be happy to take up the invitation that you have just suggested my hon. Friend makes, Mr Speaker. I never think of punctuality as purely an inter-city question; everybody who uses our rail network should be able to expect to be on time every time. That is why the measure of punctuality is being changed to include “on time every time”, including all the stations on a route, not just the final destination. That data is being collected for the first time now and is very encouraging. Let me confirm to my hon. Friend that data is being collected for the first time now and is very encouraging.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I think this a bit tangential to punctuality, Mr Speaker, but I might try to get it in. [HON. MEMBERS: “Give it a shot.”] Will the Secretary of State honour the pledge he made to me on 17 July 2017? I realise that that is not a punctual request, but now is the time. I asked him about the mutual mistrust between NW10 residents and HS2, and he said that his door would always be open. Now that construction has started, they feel as though they are living in a war zone, a dustbowl and the longest and largest building site in Europe. So will he make a visit or sit down with me and my constituents to sort this out?

Andrew Jones: Yes, there was a little bit of a tangent in that question. I am not the HS2 Minister, but I can, having just checked with the person who is, say that she will be happy to meet the hon. Lady. We will set that meeting up soon.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I know that, like me, the Minister will welcome the electrification of the midland main line, a project currently being undertaken, and the new half-hourly service to and from Corby, which will be a real boost for our rail services in north Northamptonshire. But there is still a demand for more northbound services from Corby, so will he help me to explore that possibility, as I think we ought to be tapping the huge potential there?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and for the rail services to and from it. The new franchise will certainly bring a wide set of positive developments for the rail passengers of Corby. I am more than happy to agree with him on this and meet him to work together to see what we can do to make these services even better.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): If the Government are going to take on my predecessor Tom Harris, who sits on the Government’s own rail review board, they had better make sure that they are right. So can the Minister explain why Mr Harris is wrong when he calls for control over Network Rail to go to the Scottish Government?

Andrew Jones: I am aware of the work that Mr Harris does as part of the rail review, and I am looking forward to seeing what the rail review says. We have had some early indications on its thinking. We have seen some speeches made by Mr Williams to give some indicative direction on its thinking, and we will see more later in the summer. I think we should be looking forward to its work with enthusiasm.

Cycling and Walking

11. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage (a) cycling and (b) walking.

**Jesse Norman** (The Minister of State, Department for Transport): Cycling and walking are an important part of transport strategy for this Government, and of course they bring great benefits in terms of health, combating obesity and improving air quality, and, as the Committee on Climate Change has reminded us, with their effects on the environment more widely. We published the cycling and walking investment strategy in 2017. Since then, we have conducted a major cycling and walking safety review, as well as providing a lot more funding; about £2 billion is being invested over this Parliament. The Department is also supporting 46 local authorities with their local cycling and walking infrastructure plans, so they can deliver cycling and walking schemes according to a more phased and consistent long-term programme.

Daniel Kawczynski: As the Minister is an MP in neighbouring Herefordshire, I hope he can come to visit the excellent new cycle track in Shropshire. It has been built by Shropshire Council between the villages of Pontesbury and Minsterley and makes it more safe to cycle between villages in our county. Will the Minister come and have a look at the scheme? What more can he do to support councils in the building of safe cycle tracks?

**Jesse Norman**: My hon. Friend will be aware that we have just made an award to Shrewsbury for the relief road, through the large local majors scheme. I look...
forward to visiting that road at some future point, and at the same time I will certainly tie in a happy cycle down the excellent cycle path between Pontesbury and Minsterley. My hon. Friend should know that, more widely, we are now investing at a high rate in cycling and walking schemes, including through the transforming cities fund, which is now up to £2.5 billion in total; the housing infrastructure fund; and our new £675 million future high streets fund, which is specifically targeted at smaller conurbations.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Yorkhill and Kelvingrove Community Council recently submitted a £2 million community-led bid to the Sustrans Community Links Plus competition, with the ambition of making the area Scotland’s most accessible community. Will the Minister welcome this cycling-village project which, as well as linking three national cycle routes, will be pedestrian, wheelchair and autism friendly? Would he welcome similar community-led initiatives throughout the UK?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will know, I am almost idiotically keen on cycling projects, so I massively welcome that development. We have recently funded Sustrans with a further £20 million-odd to support the national cycle network and are a great believer in much of the work that it does.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): We know from the international evidence what would work to boost us to continental levels of cycling: consistent, long-term funding, rather than stop-start funding, and for both capital and revenue projects. Will the Minister set out what he is planning to ask for? Will he press for cycling funding of £10 to £35 per head, to bring us up to continental levels?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Lady, I actually spent two hours yesterday in front of the Transport Committee debating exactly that question and specifying in some detail some of my hopes and expectations for future work, including for the spending review. Of course the hon. Lady is right about the importance of consistency and longevity in funding—that is what our local cycling and walking investment plans are doing and why we welcome the work that has been done in Birmingham by Mayor Andy Street and in Manchester through the Chris Boardman and Brian Deegan project—but I remind her that in 2010 the level of funding for cycling and walking was £2.50 a head; it is now at more than £7, and I hope that that upward direction will continue.

Topical Questions

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The House will be aware that yesterday the High Court ruling on the proposed expansion of Heathrow found that my Department acted lawfully on all counts. It would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to thank all those in my Department who worked on the case for their exemplary work, not only through the preparation period for the national policy statement but on the case itself. I also express my thanks to the business community, to the trade unions, including Unite in particular, and to the vast majority of Members of Parliament who have supported expansion. We must now get on with delivering that expansion for Britain, although always mindful that the expansion scheme must fit in with the UK’s climate change obligations.

Mrs Latham: With new fleets on order for London Underground, the midland main line and High Speed 2, what is the Secretary of State and his Department doing to ensure that rolling-stock manufacturers maximise the UK content on trains?

Chris Grayling: I have said to all those who are commissioning new trains, particularly when my Department has a role in the procurement, that I expect manufacturers, when they deliver trains—this is an important point going back to what the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said earlier—to leave a skills footprint and a technology footprint in the United Kingdom. One thing we can all do through the procurement process is to be absolutely insistent that that skills footprint is left behind. That does more than anything else to ensure that trains are and will be built in the United Kingdom.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Secretary of State is in charge of the worst-performing Department when it comes to emissions. Transport emissions have risen since 2010. The Committee on Climate Change said that “the fact is that we’re off track to meet our own emissions targets in the 2020s and 2030s.” Is the Secretary of State content with this failure, or will he commit to honouring the UK’s own legal and international climate change commitments?

Chris Grayling: First of all, I am part of a Government who have presided over a fall in Britain’s carbon emissions. Indeed my hon. Friends who have spoken on this matter over the past two days have set out ways in which this Government are among the leaders in the world in seeking to reduce carbon emissions and to deliver actual results in doing so. Members should look at what we are doing in pushing for a transformation of other vehicle fleets on our roads and in getting hydrogen trains on to our rail network as quickly as possible. If they look at the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) is doing to promote cycling and walking, they will see that we are spending more than previous Governments have done. There is, of course, much more to do, but we are working harder than any previous Government to deliver real change.

Andy McDonald: The Government contributed to the UN’s special report on 1.5°C, yet failed to take into account its contents when designating the airports national policy statement. Similarly, the Secretary of State admitted that the Paris agreement, ratified years ago by the UK and by almost every country in the world, was not considered when designating the ANPS. Given that the UK Government have now accepted that we are in a climate emergency, will he review the ANPS?
in the light of Paris, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report and the Committee on Climate Change advice—if yes, when?

Chris Grayling: When we prepared the ANPS and when the Airports Commission prepared its recommendations, it was done in the context of the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change. We have continued to work with the Committee on Climate Change, and I am confident that we will deliver that expansion and continue to fulfil our obligations to reduce carbon emissions and move towards what was set out this morning.

T3. [91069] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The new east midlands train franchise is likely to increase capacity southwards from Kettering, but will it improve connectivity north on the midland main line? The previous Labour Government cut our half-hourly service northwards and it is about time that we had it back.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I can confirm that, compared with today, there will more trains from Kettering going north. The trains will be new, so they will have more seats, which means that, in terms of capacity, there will be more trains and better trains. On timing, we will see the start of more services for my hon. Friend’s constituents from December 2020.

T5. [910697] Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Train commuters faced 35,000 cancellations last year owing to driver shortages. That is purely because train operators and the Government do about that?

Andrew Jones: I simply do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question. This service is not being run on the cheap. We are seeing record levels of investment—both private and public investment is at a record level. Perhaps I should point out to him that his party’s policy is to nationalise the railways, which will result in more cash required from the Government, but of course the Labour party has not yet said where it might come from. We are focused on delivering the enhancements to the network, which will meet our aspirations for a high-capacity, environmentally clean rail network underpinning the UK economy. Therefore, I am afraid that I cannot really agree with the premise of the question.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is there any progress internationally in discussions to include maritime and aviation emissions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): When it comes to maritime emissions, we can look at the work of the International Maritime Organisation, which is opposite us on the Thames. A huge amount of work was done earlier this year to look at driving down greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2050. It is interesting to note that this Government led the high-ambition coalition to get that agreement made, so we are not only leading nationally, but driving down greenhouse gas emissions internationally as well.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Ministers will have seen the National Audit Office report on the sale of railway arches by Network Rail, which includes some criticism. It is of some concern that the impact on tenants was not an explicit sale objective and was considered only late in the sale process. Ministers were aware—we had meetings with the Minister responsible before the sale took place—but they seemed indifferent to the significant potential for massive rent rises for the businesses in the railway arches across the country. Given this NAO report and its criticism, what will Ministers now do to safeguard the interests of those businesses and to make sure that they are not subjected to massive rent rises by the new leaseholder management company?

Chris Grayling: When I took on this sale, I ensured—in the work we did to prepare for the sale and with potential buyers—that additional safeguards were put in place for those tenants. Whether the arches had remained in the public sector or been sold, it would always have been right to ensure that a market rent was charged. There is no expectation of rent increases out of line with market rents. In the public sector, it would not have been proper use of public money to provide subsidised rents for businesses.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On airport security, given the stresses and strains on many police forces, not least the Met police and Sussex police, what further consideration has the Transport Secretary given to allowing the British Transport police to have responsibility for the security of British airports?

Chris Grayling: That suggestion has been put to me on a couple of occasions. At the moment, because of the nature of the threat around our airports and the fact that so much airport security—particularly at our principal airports—is done through the Metropolitan police, who co-ordinate anti-terror work nationally, I am not yet convinced that it would be the right thing to do, but I am always open to considering change if it will deliver improvement.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Constituents have contacted me again this week to highlight the eye-watering increases in the cost of commuting by rail to Bristol, and how that is forcing them into their cars. After yesterday’s climate emergency debate, is it not time for Ministers to act on extortionate rail fares?

Andrew Jones: We are in the sixth year of capping regulated fares in line with inflation. Also this year, we have introduced the railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds—effectively extending child fares up to their 18th birthday. The hon. Lady should recognise the action that is taking place and remember that Labour gave us a 10% fare increase during its last year in office. Where Labour is running the devolved railways, it is also increasing fares in line with inflation, so she should be backing the Government’s policy, not criticising it.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I was hugely concerned to see that, although the Secretary of State was sent a memo in November 2017 outlining how many millions of people would be affected by the third runway expansion at Heathrow—up to 13 million people were planned to be part of a publicity campaign letting them know what
was going on, and 5 million people were to be leafleted directly—that campaign never took place because it was vetoed by officials at the Department. We effectively had a vote in this place when communities and the people who represent them were entirely unaware of the extent of extra noise from Heathrow. How can the Secretary of State be confident that there really is public support for this project when the public are wholly unaware of its impact on them?

Chris Grayling: I assure my right hon. Friend that nobody in my Department has vetoed any consultations. We have carried out all the consultations that we are statutorily obliged to carry out. Of course Heathrow airport is now also so obliged, and has been carrying out consultations itself, so we cannot veto it; this is part of a process. As I have said all along, a central part of the proposal is that Heathrow delivers a world-class package of support to affected communities, and that is central to what we will insist that it does. That is an absolute given and an absolute red line for the Government.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the ministerial team aware that an all-party group of Members of Parliament came together to secure the seatbelt legislation many years ago? After 13 failed attempts, we actually got it through on the 14th, and the number of lives saved and serious injuries prevented has been substantial. The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, which I chair and which is still a vigorous cross-party group, is concerned by the report today that seatbelt wearing is declining. A quarter of the people killed on the roads last year were not wearing their seatbelts. Could we make it an enforceable offence with three penalty points? Can we take action on this?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): We absolutely recognise the original achievement of passing that legislation. I thank PACTS for the work that it has done on this report, which I warmly welcome. Needless to say, we are working very closely with it. We will look very closely at the report. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have a road safety refresh statement coming up over the summer, and we will look at this in that context as well.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): There is a huge problem with congestion at Kibworth in my constituency. What development funding will be available to work up a bypass scheme, and will there be any money available as part of RIS—road investment strategy—3?

Jesse Norman: I am not aware of the scheme that my hon. Friend has specifically raised. The RIS 2 announcement will not be made until towards the end of this year, and RIS 3 will not begin until 2025. However, I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the issue in more detail, because it is obviously very important to his constituents.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Now that this House has taken the lead in supporting Labour’s climate change emergency motion yesterday, does the Department for Transport not agree that it is time that we made sure that there can be no new roads without cycle lanes, unless there is a damned good reason why not, and no new housing without cycle locks and electric car charging points?

Chris Grayling: Of course we will continue to seek to expand the cycle network. Given the nature of the hon. Lady’s constituency, I hope she will welcome the commitment and the money that this Government are putting into MetroWest that will help to reduce congestion in the centre of Bristol, get people out of their cars and create a cleaner environment for people in her city.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): You will recall, Mr Speaker, that I have moaned previously about the fact that there was a bridge knocked down in my constituency, near to the Corby constituency and right by a business development centre, leaving people stranded. Thanks to the efforts of a local community action group, ROAR—Reinstate Our Access Road—plus Councillor Gill Mercer, and, in particular, the intervention by the excellent Secretary of State, that bridge is now going to be rebuilt. Does the Secretary of State agree that local democracy, hard work and a Secretary of State can get things done?

Chris Grayling: I am very pleased that we managed to resolve the problem. My hon. Friend puts his finger on an important point. When the unexpected happens or an unintended consequence disrupts a community, the ministerial team and I will always try to do everything we can to ameliorate or change it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Yesterday’s judicial review on Heathrow was concerned only with the legality of the decision, not the merits of airport expansion. Given that this House has overwhelmingly affirmed that we face a climate emergency, surely a swift and easy way of meeting our obligations would be to cancel the third runway at Heathrow. Not only will it pollute my constituents’ lungs, but it is costing us the earth—literally.

Chris Grayling: I gently remind the hon. Lady that this Parliament voted with a majority of nearly 300 to designate the national policy statement because we recognise that we need to provide jobs for the future, economic opportunities, and indeed the wealth that will deliver the environmental technologies that will clean up this country and help to clean up the planet. As I said earlier, we have sought, and the Airports Commission has sought, to make sure that these expansion plans are consistent with those obligations. International aviation does present a challenge, but I do not believe that we are suddenly going to see it disappear in the future. International aviation is only likely to disappear if the cost of holidays and the cost of travel is put up by Labour.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Rail Minister will recall that on his recent visit to my constituency, Associated British Ports and the other business representatives present expressed concern about east-west capacity for freight haulage. The Secretary of State referred to this earlier. Will the Minister agree to meet me, ABP and other representatives to see how we can further increase capacity?
Andrew Jones: I had a very interesting visit to my hon. Friend’s constituency. He laid on an extremely good range of businesses, so I have clear insight into the concerns of the business community that he serves. I would of course be very happy to meet him. I can confirm that increasing capacity and having more freight services in the UK is a Government priority.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Holywell Town Council, in conjunction with Tesco, has recently put in place the first electronic vehicle charging point in a town centre in my constituency. I know the Minister will agree that the Government need to do more, so will he give an update on what progress has been made since the fanfare announcement last July of support for electronic charging points? How many have been introduced as a result of a Government initiative?

Jesse Norman: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we take that matter very seriously. We are about to launch the charging infrastructure investment fund, which will see £200 million of public money matched by £200 million of private sector money. We expect a rapid roll-out to what is already one of the largest charging networks in Europe.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge expressway started life as a project under the coalition Government, with Liberal Democrats in the Department at the time? Does he agree that the best opportunity to mitigate its effects for local villages is for it to go west of Oxford?

Jesse Norman: I can certainly confirm that the project originated in the coalition Government, and it would be quite disingenuous of any political party that was part of it to seek to distance itself from that decision. Of course, I can make no statement whatever about the direction, since that is the subject of a continued process of consultation and review.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) in thanking the excellent Secretary of State for getting the Leyland bridge issue sorted out. My constituents in Irthingborough are delighted that the bridge will be rebuilt, but will he join us in keeping the pressure up, to ensure that it is done as quickly as possible? The inconvenience is unacceptable, and that would be very much appreciated.

Chris Grayling: I will indeed give that assurance. We continue with the biggest investment programme in the railways for decades and decades, and indeed the biggest investment programme in our roads for decades and decades—an investment programme that will help motorists, but which the Labour party wants to scale back, as part of its war on the motorist. I give a commitment that, as we seek to invest in the future of this country, we will do everything we can to minimise the disruption. I cannot promise that there will be none, but we will try to minimise it.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Does it flow from questions?

Matt Rodda: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Briefly.

Matt Rodda: I seek your advice, because I believe that the buses Minister may have inadvertently misled the House. In our exchanges, she claimed that all local authorities have powers to franchise buses. I believe that the Bus Services Act 2017 only allows metro mayors to do that, and there is a very small number of them, whereas there are hundreds of local authorities.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is champing at the bit. She clearly wants to respond, and we are happy for her to do so.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I did not say “franchising”; I said “partnerships”. The Bus Services Act introduced new powers for local authorities and operators to work together through partnerships and franchising. Mayoral authorities have those powers automatically. All local authorities must approach the Department if they wish to get permission. They need to prepare business strategies and put together programmes of work, but we are ready and waiting to work with them, as we do already. Mayoral authorities can franchise, and local authorities can put together partnerships. I am more than happy to put that on the record.

Mr Speaker: We will leave it there for now.
Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): To ask the Prime Minister to make a statement on the findings of the inquiry into the National Security Council leak.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The National Security Council takes critical decisions about keeping this country safe. It was established in 2010, in part following lessons learned from the Iraq war, to ensure proper co-ordinated decision making across the whole of the Government. It operates with the full breadth of expertise in the room, with Ministers from the relevant Departments and advisers and officials, including the Chief of the Defence Staff, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the heads of the intelligence services and others.

The decisions that it makes are critical to the safety of British citizens and to British interests both in this country and around the world. For example, it is inconceivable today that the Cabinet could take a decision to commit combat troops without a full and challenging prior discussion in the NSC, on the basis of full papers, including written legal advice, prepared and stress-tested by all relevant Departments, and with decisions formally minuted. I am sure that the whole House will recognise how important it is that those decisions are taken in an environment in which members of the council and those who advise them feel free to speak their mind, with absolute certainty that the advice that they provide and the conclusions that they reach will remain confidential.

The leak investigation into the disclosure of information about 5G was constituted to ensure that the integrity of the NSC in general was upheld and, vitally, that participants in NSC meetings could continue to hold full confidence in its operation and the confidentiality of its proceedings. The Prime Minister set out her response to evidence from the leak investigation last night, and has thanked all members of the National Security Council for their full co-operation and candour during the investigation.

The unauthorised disclosure of any information from the Government is serious, and especially so from the National Security Council. The Prime Minister has said that she now considers that this matter has been closed, and the Cabinet Secretary does not consider it necessary to refer it to the police, but we would of course co-operate fully should the police themselves consider that an investigation were necessary.

The House will recognise that it is the policy of successive Governments of different political parties not to comment on the detail of leak investigations, and I will not comment on specific circumstances or personnel decisions.

Tom Watson: The primary duty of any Government is to keep our country safe and secure. On that we all agree. This leak from the National Security Council is a fundamental breach of that duty. Let us be clear here: the Prime Minister believes that her former Defence Secretary leaked information from the National Security Council; he vehemently denies it. Only one of these accounts is accurate.

I do not think we have ever seen a leak from the National Security Council, and that is why this is so serious. The damning letter from the Prime Minister was a result of her understanding that to leak from that committee was an abdication of responsibility and public duty. It is indicative of the malaise and sickness at the heart of this ailing Government. It is indicative of the sorry state the Conservative party finds itself in. In response to receiving the most brutal sacking I can think of, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) has protested his innocence. Therefore, this matter cannot be, as the Prime Minister says, closed.

The essential point here is that the Prime Minister has sacked the Secretary of State for Defence because she believes there is compelling evidence that he has committed a crime, but despite that she does not believe that he should face a criminal investigation. Where is the justice in that? In what world is it acceptable that the Prime Minister should be the arbiter of whether a politician she believes is guilty of criminal conduct in office should face a criminal investigation? Can the Minister confirm that there were no leaks from the leak inquiry itself, given that details seem to have been passed on to a national newspaper on 30 April?

At the heart of this battle in the National Security Council was whether the Prime Minister’s judgment that Huawei should be allowed to be part of our critical infrastructure network was sound. Many believe it was not. Our Five Eyes partners are so concerned about the UK allowing this company to participate in our 5G network that they are considering whether they can safely continue to share intelligence with us. The Minister will know that for the Americans and the Australians to raise public concerns on this matter is unprecedented. The Five Eyes network is the intelligence apparatus that has helped keep this country safe for nearly half a century. I know that. I have been a Defence Minister, and I have seen the material that we share with each other in total confidence.

In his defiant challenge, the former Defence Secretary has put the Prime Minister’s integrity and judgment in the spotlight. Whether or not he is guilty should be a question for the criminal justice system. The question that the Minister has to answer today is whether he is confident that the Prime Minister’s decision to allow Huawei to participate in our 5G networks keeps this country safe and protects our intelligence relationships with our allies.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman elided several different subjects in his questions. On the substance of the Government’s policy decisions, it has been said already from this Dispatch Box several times that the review of 5G networks by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is a matter of public record. The Government have committed to telling the House of their conclusions once those decisions have been taken and approved at all levels within the Government and once we are ready to bring the information to the House. That will be the time for the House to learn what the Government have decided and to hold Ministers to account for their decisions.
I can reiterate to the House that the Government’s priorities for the future of telecommunications remain strong: cyber-security practices, greater resilience throughout telecommunications networks and diversity in the marketplace. Again, as has been said before from this Dispatch Box, this is a policy challenge that goes beyond a single company or even a single country, and we continue to work very closely with all our Five Eyes allies and with other international partners.

The problem with this particular case was not so much the material disclosed as the forum from which the leak came. The Prime Minister set up the inquiry and took the decisions she took yesterday to maintain the integrity and secrecy that is essential for the proper conduct of the business of the Government of the United Kingdom, whichever party happens to be in office. As far as I am aware, the inquiry was conducted on the basis of confidentiality throughout its proceedings. It came to conclusions that were reported to my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, and she took the decisions she announced yesterday.

This boils down to what is set out in paragraph 1.6 of the “Ministerial Code”:

“Ministers only remain in office for so long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister. She is the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister and the appropriate consequences of a breach of those standards.”

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not only the work of our intelligence and security services that could be compromised by unauthorised disclosure but the Council’s access to information and advice provided by our allies on a top secret basis? Can he reassure us therefore that our allies have been reassured in turn that this sorry episode will not be repeated?

Mr Lidington: Appropriate contact is of course being made with our key allies, as my right hon. Friend would expect. He is absolutely right. I, like he, can recall discussions that involved not only material of the highest level of classification within the UK Government system but the sharing of information disclosed to us in confidence by key allies. Without going into detail—for obvious reasons—I should remind the House that among the subjects discussed at the National Security Council in the last year alone have been our analysis of and response to the chemical weapons attacks in Salisbury and our analysis and response to the civil war and conflict in Syria. I think that Members on both sides of the House will appreciate the importance of these discussions remaining confidential at all times and of all participants having full confidence that that will continue to be the case.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): This is a most disgraceful episode from the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson). Fair play to the Prime Minister for acting as swiftly as she did, but I am afraid that it is not in her gift to say that the matter is closed. Indeed, the fact that we are here shows that it is far from closed. The fourth paragraph of the Prime Minister’s letter states that all the Cabinet Ministers interviewed “answered questions, engaged properly, provided as much information as possible”,

yet the conduct of the right hon. Gentleman was not “of the same standard”. What was his conduct? What exactly did he avoid answering?

What is the purpose of this investigation? Surely to God it was not set up only to determine who the leak came from. Surely once that has been determined there must be a more severe consequence than just someone losing their Cabinet position. If the integrity of the Government—what is left of it—is not to be further shot to pieces, there must be more severe consequences. Does the right hon. Gentleman who has been sacked have a future in the Conservative party, or will he be suspended from it? Will he be eligible for future candidacy within the Conservative party, and will he have his CBE removed by the Government? Finally, will the Minister stand at the Dispatch Box and answer a clear question? Has the Official Secrets Act been broken—yes or no?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman’s final question is not a judgment that I or any other Minister in any Government can make. Whether a criminal offence has been committed is a matter for independent prosecution authorities, and ultimately for the courts. I said earlier that I would not go further into the details of the investigation and its conclusions than had already been set out in the Prime Minister’s public statement.

Members across the House will recognise the history of the close working relationship between my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), and that ought to persuade the House that the Prime Minister would not have taken such a decision were there not compelling evidence and no credible alternative explanation for what happened. As the hon. Gentleman said, the Prime Minister stated in her letter that during the investigation the conduct of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire and his team was committed is a matter for independent prosecution authorities, and ultimately for the courts. I said earlier that I would not go further into the details of the investigation and its conclusions than had already been set out in the Prime Minister’s public statement.

On the hon. Gentleman’s request for further punishments, honours are not a matter for a ministerial decision but for an independent committee in any case, but I would just say that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire has lost a job that he loved and to which he was utterly committed, and I think that should stand.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I entirely endorse the words used by my right hon. Friend in his statement, and it is necessary that the working of the National Security Council is kept confidential. Without that, our allies cannot trust us, and it would become impossible to discuss secret matters within the Government. Does he agree that we seem to have watched the progressive breakdown of collective responsibility? Unfortunately, that appears to have a corrosive quality, which starts in people’s willingness to contradict colleagues over policy issues in Cabinet, and creeps incrementally into a willingness to brief externally on discussions of an increasingly secret nature. Does he share my hope that if some good comes out of this most unfortunate episode, it will finally be a shot across the bows for those who think that such behaviour is acceptable?
Mr Lidington: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend about the corrosive effect of unauthorised disclosures. We all have to be honest with ourselves. I do not think there has been a Government in history from which there have not been leaks and gossip from time to time—as I look at Labour Front Benchers, my mind goes back to what we saw under the Blair and Brown Administrations. But I do want to say this in response to my right hon. and learned Friend: above all, when it comes to National Security Council discussions—I think this applies to the Cabinet, too—there is great merit in the very old-fashioned precept that Members should speak with complete candour in the room and shut up when they get outside.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) asked the Minister a very direct question: whether he thought that the Official Secrets Act had been broken. In reply, the Minister said that it was for others to decide. Has the Attorney General been asked for his opinion? Was any other legal advice sought by the Prime Minister in coming to her conclusion?

Mr Lidington: It is not a matter for the Attorney General or any other Minister. This decision has been taken on the basis of the lack of confidence that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, regrettably, came to feel in my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State for Defence. It followed the principles I set out in quoting from paragraph 1.6 of the ministerial code.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Having been somewhat involved in the establishment of the National Security Council in its current form, and having sat on it for six years, I completely understand the Prime Minister’s correct understanding that it has to be, as the Minister said, a sealed container if it is to do its work appropriately. Does he agree that notwithstanding the rather brilliant confections of Opposition Members, on this occasion—thank goodness—so far as the substance is concerned and regardless of its legal standing, which I accept is a matter for others to decide, there does not appear to have been a compromise of any classified information?

Mr Lidington: I do not want to rush to make that assumption because normally all papers that are considered by the National Security Council are at an extremely high level of classification. The key point—I think this is the thrust of my right hon. Friend’s question, and I agree with him on it—is that the issue at stake was less the substance of the material that was disclosed than the principle of a leak from the National Security Council. The fact of that leak—that breach of confidentiality—is what puts at risk the mutual trust that is essential for all Ministers and advisers attending those meetings to have in one another, and the trust, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) said earlier, that we expect our allies to have in our respecting the confidentiality of the material that they share with us.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Prime Minister may or may not be right, and as far as the Government are concerned, her exchange of letters yesterday is the end of the matter, but surely when it comes to matters in this House, different considerations apply. The right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) and the Prime Minister are both Members of the House, and they now have very different versions of events in relation to a matter of some national importance. It is surely important that the House should know which of them is right. For that reason, surely either the Prime Minister has to publish the evidence on which she relied, or somebody else has to be allowed to mark her homework. It cannot be possible that both mutually contradictory versions can be allowed to stand.

Mr Lidington: What we are talking about is a leak inquiry, carried out on the instruction of the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary, by another appropriate official, into the unauthorised disclosure of the proceedings of the National Security Council. It is an internal Government matter, just as any such disclosure and any leak inquiry would be considered a matter for the Government concerned—Labour, Conservative or coalition. I really do not think that it would be right to be in a position where the House collectively tried to establish itself as an investigating authority into internal matters relating to the conduct of Ministers as members of the Government, or the conduct of officials as members of the Government. Those are matters that it is quite proper for the Government to determine, and it is then for Ministers, as I am doing this morning, to come to explain the Government’s decision and be held to account by the House.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Having also sat on the NSC for several years, I recognise the importance of undertaking this leak inquiry. However, at the heart of this is a broader question about the approach that both the NSC and the Cabinet need to take to serve the national and public interest. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend on the NSC, but surely an element of this extends to how Cabinet is conducted, the rules around it and the behaviour of those who sit in the Cabinet.

Is it not now time to be clearer about the ministerial code of conduct and the role of the public interest in briefings given externally? I say that because we have a freedom of information law that clearly sets a public interest test that is routinely applied by Departments, yet it seems that the Secretaries of State running those Departments can routinely set that test themselves, without any regard for the way in which their officials would do so from day to day by almost certainly excluding ever publishing advice to Ministers when the public ask for it.

Mr Lidington: I disagree with my right hon. Friend on this point. I think that Ministers and their officials take their duties to put the public interest first very seriously. That is absolutely central to the principles of not only the ministerial code, but the civil service code which, let us not forget, has statutory force, unlike the ministerial code. In my experience of the last nine years in government, Ministers take those principles very seriously indeed, and their officials—particularly senior officials—are clear and robust in reminding Ministers of those duties. I agree with my right hon. Friend in
This leak is at the heart of the issue and the decision before the Prime Minister yesterday evening is not so much the substance of what has been disclosed as the fact that the leak was of proceedings of the National Security Council. Therefore, whether or not the various harm tests under the Official Secrets Act were met in this particular case, the Prime Minister reached the decision that, regretfully, she no longer had confidence in my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire. That was why she reached that decision in her assessment of the public interest.

Mr Lidington: If the police consider an investigation to be necessary, the Government, at all levels—Ministers, officials and special advisers—will give full co-operation.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire has not been accused of any criminal offence but, sadly, he has lost the confidence of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and she has therefore acted in accordance with the principles set out in the ministerial code.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman mixes up a number of matters. The Attorney General’s consent is required to a prosecution under the Official Secrets Act, but the Attorney General has no power to initiate an investigation or a prosecution. The hon. Gentleman is also continuing to confuse two points. What we are dealing with—this is at the heart of the issue and the decision before the Prime Minister yesterday evening—is not so much the substance of what has been disclosed as the fact that the leak was of proceedings of the National Security Council. Therefore, whether or not the various harm tests under the Official Secrets Act were met in this particular case, the Prime Minister reached the decision that, regretfully, she no longer had confidence in my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire. That was why she reached that decision in her assessment of the public interest.
Intelligence and Security Committee and being subject to the same official secrets arrangements and the same briefings that Ministers get. I do know that if I had leaked from that Committee, I would have been subject to a criminal prosecution. My question to the Minister is simply this: did the Cabinet Secretary’s report or the Prime Minister’s assessment suggest that at any time the criminal threshold has been crossed, and has a report been made at any time to the police, as would be the case for any crime committed on business or personal premises?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, if there had been evidence to convince the Cabinet Secretary that a crime had been committed, or that prima facie a crime might have been committed, he would have reported that to the Prime Minister and come to a different judgment about whether the Government needed to refer the matter to the police. The decision that the Cabinet Secretary came to was that this matter did not need to be referred to the police. To take up the right hon. Gentleman’s initial point, there is a difference between the tests for criminal offences that are, as he will recall, set out in great detail in the various sections of the Official Secrets Act, and falling below the standards of confidentiality and other conduct required of Ministers under the ministerial code.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): There are a few troubling aspects of this affair, to put it mildly. As we have seen—most people would, I think, agree about this—there have been a number of leaks from the Cabinet as a whole, particularly in the past two years, yet inquiries into those leaks either do not seem to have been pursued or have not led anywhere. An impression is given that a leak from the Cabinet might be okay but a leak from the NSC is not, and we must be very careful to avoid that. I do not think the ministerial code even mentions the NSC or says that it requires a higher level of propriety. Are there any proposals to change the ministerial code in this regard?

Mr Lidington: Because the National Security Council is constitutionally a Committee of the Cabinet, it is automatically covered by the provisions of the code that apply to the Cabinet and all Cabinet Committees. The particularly serious nature of this leak is derived from the fact that it is inherent in the nature of National Security Council discussions and the papers going before it that the very highest degree of secrecy needs to be maintained, but my right hon. Friend’s point about the need for higher standards as regards Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings is also well made.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Minister just said that the former Defence Secretary is not accused of committing a criminal act. If he broke the Official Secrets Act, he is accused of committing a criminal act. Can the Minister now answer the question that has been asked three times and he has failed to answer: has the advice of the Attorney General been sought or not?

Mr Lidington: As I said in response to an earlier question, the role of the Attorney General under the Official Secrets Act is not to authorise or initiate investigations, but to give or withhold consent for a prosecution if and when a finished case is presented to him.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I know from sitting firmly on the other side of the official-ministerial divide how hard it is to get officials, let alone our allies, to share important, and particularly secret, information with Ministers at all. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what matters is that we protect the integrity of the National Security Council if it is to operate at all properly?

Mr Lidington: Yes, I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): How can this matter be closed as far as our security partners are concerned given that the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) has said that he is innocent? Has he been interviewed under oath at any stage during the investigation, because I note that he is not here to set out his position on the Floor of the House and it is vital that our security partners now have confidence? If it was not the former Secretary of State for Defence, who was it?

Mr Lidington: I think our security partners can have confidence that the Prime Minister has acted swiftly and resolutely to uphold the essential integrity and security of National Security Council proceedings.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is regrettable that the Deputy Prime Minister did not offer to make a statement to the House and instead had to respond to an urgent question and that he is not giving away the information that Members are requesting. The former Secretary of State has sworn on the lives of his children that he did not leak the information. This seems to have been a kangaroo court reaching a decision in secret without any evidence to base that decision on. Mr Speaker, you will remember what happened to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). There was a rush to judgment and he was forced to resign, but it was then proved that what he was saying was true. Is the Deputy Prime Minister absolutely sure, without any reasonable doubt, that the former Secretary of State is guilty, or could it just be possible that the kangaroo court has made a mistake?

Mr Lidington: There was a thorough investigation. Every ministerial member of the National Security Council, and those officials and special advisers who might have had access to the material relating to the proceedings of that particular meeting, was spoken to and, as the Prime Minister’s letter yesterday made clear, co-operated fully with the investigation. The investigation report was presented to the Prime Minister by the Cabinet Secretary and, having studied it, my right hon. Friend came to the conclusion that there was “compelling evidence” to suggest responsibility on the part of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire. As she said in her letter to him yesterday, she took into account the fact that, in the findings of the investigation, there was a difference between the conduct of the former Secretary of State and his team compared with the conduct of other Ministers and their teams. That is
why she came to the conclusion that she did. I repeat that this comes back to the question of Ministers serving in office so long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister. That is a principle that has applied to every Government in this country, and it is what applied in this case.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): By all accounts, the former Defence Secretary is the 38th person to lose their job in a Government riddled with incompetence and disloyalty, so it really is going some actually to be their job in a Government riddled with incompetence and disloyalty, so it really is going some actually to be this case.

Mr Lidington: For the reasons that I have given in response to a number of earlier questions. The key issue here is less the substance of what was disclosed and more the fact that the disclosure was made in respect of proceedings of the National Security Council.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Notwithstanding the particulars of this case, is it not time for the Government finally to bring forward the espionage Bill, which would include the long overdue root and branch reform of the Official Secrets Act? Despite the Deputy Prime Minister’s comments today, is it also not the case that Cabinet leaks will continue as long as Cabinet papers retain their current classification? Is it not time for a review of how Cabinet papers are classified, and should they not all be classified as secret or above?

Mr Lidington: The question of the classification of documents is kept under review the whole time. In my recent experience, some Cabinet papers have been classified at secret level and others at a lower level. The classification depends on the substance of what is included in those papers. My hon. Friend also asked about future legislation, and we are obviously keen to bring forward the measure to which he referred, and other Bills, to the House as soon as we can.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The former Secretary of State for Defence clearly thought that it was his way or the Huawei, and he has been told by the Prime Minister to go away, but he has not shut up. Is it not the reality that we will not get the truth unless the former Defence Secretary makes a resignation or sacking statement to this House and we have the chance to debate it to get to the bottom of the fiasco?

Mr Lidington: Whether my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire wants to apply to you, Mr Speaker, to make a personal statement is a matter for him, but there has been a public exchange of letters between him and the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister came to her decision for the reasons that she gave, and I have tried to set those out this morning. Her sense that the decision was necessary was accompanied by a sense of real sadness, because this is not a decision that any Prime Minister would take lightly and it would not be made without considerable regret.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The National Security Council is a relatively modern phenomenon, and my right hon. Friend has set out some of the issues that the body discusses. The clear concern of the House, however, is that if my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) is not responsible for the leak, which is what he says, then someone within the NSC is. It is therefore vital that there is an independent police investigation to demonstrate whether or not he is guilty.

Mr Lidington: It is obviously for the police to decide whether they believe that the case merits their investigation, but it is not their job to conduct leak inquiries regarding material disclosed within the Government, for which there is an established system. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister concluded in her letter to the former Defence Secretary that there was no credible alternative explanation to this particular leak.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The events of the past week have brought into sharp relief both the importance of handling such sensitive information responsibly and the perception that that is undertaken securely. With that in mind, will the Minister reassure me that if the Government had concerns that the Official Secrets Act may have been broken, the matter would be referred to the relevant authorities?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, the Cabinet Secretary made a careful assessment of those matters in coming to his judgment, but that judgment is that this is not something that the Government should refer to the police, and the Prime Minister considers the matter closed. Again, I repeat, it is the fact that this was a disclosure from the National Security Council that is at the heart of the seriousness with which the matter has been taken.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said, and I have two questions. First, will he confirm that it is not naive or misplaced still to believe that we have a senior civil service that is imbued with integrity and probity and that we can rely upon? Secondly, following the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), we know that the security and intelligence family is close and, like all families, it relies on a mutual relationship of trust. Will the Minister assure me and the House that, rather than just taking it for granted that our allies consider that we are still trustworthy and steadfast, we will go out proactively and positively to reaffirm that case? Not to do so would clearly put our country at risk.

Mr Lidington: First, yes, I am very confident that we have an impartial and professional senior civil service that is always ready to serve the elected Government to the best of its ability, whatever political stripe that Government bear. Secondly, it is actions rather than words that will demonstrate to our allies on security and intelligence matters that they should continue to trust us, just as we look to their actions when there are reports of things going wrong within their systems, but it is absolutely right that we must act swiftly and be clear about putting right any flaws in our system of the kind that we have experienced with the NSC in the past couple of weeks.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Given that this has never happened before, is not the real question how it can be that the former Defence Secretary, or indeed anyone else, has felt so emboldened and
confident to leak confidential information now? Is not the answer to that, in large part, that this Government are so fractured and weakened that they have lost the authority and cohesion to be able to govern? That process will now be compounded by the Government beginning to eat themselves alive in the search for a new leader. Is not the real way to guarantee that this does not happen again for the Government to put themselves out of their own misery and call a general election?

Mr Lidington: Dear, dear. It takes a bit of brass neck for an SNP Member to talk about fights between party leaders. The truth is that the Prime Minister has taken very firm and swift action in response to the leak investigation that was carried out on her instruction. The Government are getting on with the task of developing policies designed to protect and enhance the national security of the United Kingdom in respect of both the safety of our citizens and the defence of our interests around the world.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): All members of the National Security Council have sworn the Privy Council oath, and top secret material is circulated and discussed. If a leak of information from the National Security Council is not a breach of the Official Secrets Act, what is?

Mr Lidington: The various tests for a criminal offence are set out in detail in the Official Secrets Act. Whether or not that threshold has been breached depends on harm tests, and those harm tests are different depending on the category and the content of the information we are talking about.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Surely one risk of this leak is that it effectively predetermines the public mood on the substantive issue of Huawei in a more hawkish fashion before we have come to our own policy conclusions. Of course the Five Eyes are our most important allies, and we have to do everything we can to reassure them, but we are also a sovereign country, and we have our own unique circumstances and our own more nuanced position with Beijing, so can I urge my right hon. Friend to continue all the work across Whitehall in a calm, deliberative and, above all, objective fashion so that we come to the right policy on the point of substance?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those comments, and he is right. In carrying out that work, it is vital that we have a forum in the National Security Council where the intelligence chiefs can talk frankly to Ministers about their assessment of the balance of risks and threats this country faces and where Ministers, taking account of the best advice available to them, can weigh up how to strike the right balance between this country’s future and developing security interests and our future and developing economic interests to try to steer a way forward that delivers the best outcome for the people of the United Kingdom.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Should any evidence or confirmations disproving these allegations come to light as individuals write up this story, what would be the consequences or implications of that?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend invites me to engage in a bit of hypothetical speculation. If there were to be any such clear evidence, I think the Prime Minister would want it reported to her immediately and given to her in full. It would clearly need to be the provision of information that provided some other credible explanation for the leak that has taken place.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I hold the Minister in high regard. Last week, during Prime Minister’s questions, he implied that Huawei was “a private firm”, effectively at arm’s length from the Chinese state, as one of our own firms would be. Is that not at best a half truth? Huawei is 99% owned by Chinese trade unions and that, in effect, is being part of a one-party state. Therefore, Huawei is, in effect, an arm of the Chinese state.

Mr Lidington: Huawei is officially owned by its employees and is a private Chinese company. It is true, as I believe I said at the Dispatch Box and I have certainly said on previous occasions, as have other Ministers, that there is an issue here, in that Chinese law requires all Chinese companies to co-operate with the Chinese state. But, as I said earlier in response to another question, the review of 5G goes beyond a single company or a single country, because we need to make sure, among other objectives, that we have a diverse marketplace, so that the Government have a genuine choice of suppliers available to them.

Tom Watson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the points of order, on the assumption, which I would like to think is safe, that neither Member would seek to continue the debate we have just had. I feel sure that these are matters of order and that the Front-Bench Members will focus with a laser-like intensity on that.

Tom Watson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his answer to me earlier, the Secretary of State said that the matter of investigating a criminal act is one for the police, not for Ministers. Can you assist me as to what remedy there is if I think he may have inadvertently misled the House on that? While we have been in the Chamber, the Metropolitan police have told “ITV News” that the matter to investigate is one for the Cabinet Office and if it shares the information with the police they will investigate, but they will not investigate unless the information is shared. Will the Deputy Prime Minister clear this matter up? Is there a way he can do that? Perhaps he could agree to share the information with the police from the Dispatch Box.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has, as I think he knows, found his own salvation: by means of the attempted point of order he has registered his point. He has placed on the record information that may have been known to some Members but, for example, was certainly not known to me, because I have not been consulting electronic devices but have been merely attending to my duties in the Chair. If the Minister wishes to respond, he is free to do so, but there is, at this point, no sign of him uncoiling. However, the hon. Member for West Bromwich
East (Tom Watson) is a dogged terrier, and I feel sure he and others will pursue these matters if they feel so inclined in the days ahead.

**Tom Watson** A former Rottweiler.

**Mr Speaker:** Well, I am not sure I see the appropriateness of the inclusion of the word “former”.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Deputy Prime Minister said that the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) was not being “accused of any criminal offence”.

However, in response to my question, he said that that was not for him to determine. Given the further information just shared by the Labour Front Bench, both of those things do not stack up, so I wonder whether the Deputy Prime Minister felt that he should, if you would indulge him, come to the Dispatch Box to clear up these issues that have been raised by me and the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson).

**Mr Speaker:** I would if he did, but he doesn’t, so I won’t. But I rather fancy that these matters will be explored further in the days ahead. Realistically, it does not seem to me that there is obvious scope for the scrutiny of this matter further in the Chamber today, but who knows what subsequent days might bring. Let us leave it there for now.

**No-Deal Brexit: Cross-channel Freight**

11.34 am

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) **Urgent Question:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the no-deal Brexit preparations for cross-channel ferry and freight services.

**The Secretary of State for Transport** (Chris Grayling): The Government are now reviewing our contingency planning for a no-deal EU exit, in the wake of recent developments. No decisions have yet been taken for the preparations for the new EU exit date of 31 October, although of course many of the preparations that were made for 29 March are still in place. The planning assumptions that underpinned the original maritime freight capacity activity will need reviewing in the light of the article 50 extension, to understand whether they are still valid. A collective view will then be taken across the Government as to the necessary contingency plans that will need to be implemented, and that will include working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to understand the needs of their supply chains.

In December, we entered into contracts with ferry operators to provide additional capacity into the UK as part of no-deal planning. Those contracts were scheduled to run up until September, and were an essential insurance policy to ensure the continued supply of category 1 goods—primarily medicines and medical devices for the NHS—in the event of a no-deal Brexit. As I have indicated to the House previously, we took that step because of a change to the modelling carried out across the Government that indicated that flows across the short straits could fall significantly, and crucially for significantly longer than had previously been proposed by our analysts. It would have been irresponsible for the Government not to act, as no deal was and remains the legal default. It was an insurance policy, and insurance policies are a prudent investment, whether or not they are actually used.

Following the article 50 extension until 31 October, the Government have now decided to terminate the contracts with Brittany Ferries and DFDS with immediate effect, to minimise the cost to taxpayers. The termination of those contracts costs £43.8 million, which is lower than the National Audit Office’s estimate of the total termination costs, and I should say that it represents around 1% of the overall £4 billion package of no-deal EU exit preparations that the Government have wisely undertaken to ensure that we are ready for all eventualities.

**Alan Brown:** Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker.

I wonder whether we will ever get to the bottom of this whole mess. Truthfully, the Secretary of State’s statement does not give us any more clarification on what the Government are doing in respect of no-deal preparations. We were told that the initial contracts were part of emergency procurement for the unforeseen scenario of a no-deal Brexit, despite our having been told that the Government had prepared. We were then expected to believe the logic behind handing an emergency service contract to a company with no ships and no financial backing.
In response to an urgent question, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care advised us that the contracts were needed for shipments of priority goods such as medicines, and the Transport Secretary has repeated that in his statement today. If that was the case, why did the contracts kick in automatically on 29 March, rather than being linked to an actual no-deal scenario, whenever that might occur? What exactly did the contracts procure? Why has it taken a month for the latest contracts to be reviewed and cancelled, at a cost of £43 million? What are the Government doing in respect of the next possible no-deal Brexit date of 31 October? If the previous contracts had to be entered into in December for a March kick-in date, it is clear that planning needs to happen now. It is obvious that the Government should be working on preparations right now.

In the emergency debate on the contracts, I asked about the possibility of further legal action and the Secretary of State assured me that there would be none. “A hae ma doots” is what I said at the time, so it comes as no surprise that we now learn that P&O Ferries is suing the Government. When did the Secretary of State find out about P&O’s intentions? Where has that case got to—is it going to go through the courts, or will there be a cave-in and another £33 million settlement?

I know that Governments do not normally publish legal advice, but with this turn of events we are clearly in exceptional circumstances, so will the Government provide or publish the legal advice that they have had over this period? What independent reviews are the Government undertaking to understand the blunders that have happened and to learn lessons so that this does not happen again?

The Secretary of State repeated what the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) said earlier in Transport questions: that the £43 million cost of cancelling the ferry contracts is only 1% of the Brexit preparation costs, as if it does not matter. In actual fact, overall the ferry contracts will probably cost up to £120 million, depending on the P&O settlement, so when will somebody become accountable for this waste of money? It is not a negligible amount of money: it is a lot of money.

Many people ask me why the Secretary of State is still in post after all his blunders. I cannot answer that, but I can ask that he does the right thing, finally takes responsibility and steps aside.

Chris Grayling: As usual, we have the customary stream of nonsense from the hon. Gentleman. This issue has been scrutinised, and will continue to be scrutinised, by members of the National Audit Office, who are the appropriate people to do so. I will not comment on ongoing legal matters, except to say that the Government vigorously disagree with P&O and will defend themselves to the hilt. I really do not think that he listened to what I said today, or that he has listened for the past few times that I have talked about this in the House. The fact is that he has disagreed all along with the steps that we have taken. Let me read to him a small excerpt from a letter that I received last month. It said that my officials “have also asked that critical exports should be given priority access to the additional ferry capacity secured by the UK Government where this is not required for essential supplies.”

That request, clearly recognising the need for that capacity, came from the Cabinet Minister in the SNP Scottish Government.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We would not have had to spend the money had the party of the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) voted for the agreement. Is my right hon. Friend looking forward to the return of duty free on the ferries as much as I am?

Chris Grayling: It is very much my hope that we do reach an agreement and that duty free will not be necessary, but I am sure that if it becomes necessary, my right hon. Friend will have that opportunity. None the less, he makes a good point. To Members across this House who complain about the money that we have rightly spent on an insurance policy against a no-deal outcome, I say that the way of preventing that money being spent would have been to vote for the deal. Opposition parties have systematically refused to accept that what is before this House, and what has been before this House, is a sensible deal to deliver a sensible future partnership with the European Union. It is just a shame that they have always been unwilling to accept that.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On 5 March, I told the Secretary of State that his settlement with Eurotunnel risked further litigation from other companies. I warned that taxpayers could face more compensation bills in the tens of millions of pounds, and I was dismissed. But I was right, and he was wrong. His Department is now facing legal action from P&O Ferries. This all flows from his decision to award a contract to Seaborne Freight—the ferry company with no ships.

The Secretary of State bypassed procurement processes to award contracts—rules that were put in place to prevent this sort of waste of public money—and awarded a contract that was in breach of UK and EU public procurement law. As a result, he made a potentially unlawful £33 million settlement with Eurotunnel, promoting P&O to take legal action. Who made the decision to bypass procurement rules? Was it the Secretary of State and does he accept responsibility? The Transport Secretary should have recognised that his Eurotunnel decision risked further litigation. Why did he dismiss my concerns, and was he poorly advised?

Yesterday, we discovered that the Department must pay around £43.8 million to cancel no longer needed ferry contracts. Given that the entire Brexit process has been characterised by uncertainty, why did the Transport Secretary not negotiate contracts that could be delayed if the Brexit date was delayed? If he had, he could have avoided this colossal waste of money. What is his estimate of the total cost to the public of his no-deal contracts? Every other week, MPs must debate the Transport Secretary’s latest costly blunder. I am afraid that this will continue for as long as the Secretary of State remains in post. This country can no longer afford the Secretary of State.

Chris Grayling: That is indicative of the fact that the Labour party and the hon. Gentleman do not believe in or support the need for this Government and this
country making sure that, in all circumstances, the national health service receives the drugs that it needs. I am afraid that that is just irresponsibility on his side.

The hon. Gentleman raises various questions. He mentioned Seaborne Freight. The legal action with Eurotunnel had nothing to do with Seaborne Freight, because the contract with Seaborne Freight had been terminated several weeks before—after it had secured ships but when its principal financial backer withdrew. I did not bypass any processes. Things were done properly in accordance with Government procurement rules. They have been vetted and looked at by the National Audit Office, which has already provided one report on this. This was a collective decision by the Government to make sure that we could look after the interests of the national health service and that we took the right insurance policies in the event of a no-deal Brexit. We will continue to take the right decisions and the right insurance policies if there continues to be—I hope there will not be—a risk of a no-deal Brexit.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I do not see how the House can blame the Secretary of State for believing the Prime Minister, when she said 108 times that we were going to leave on 29 March. When her withdrawal agreement was defeated three times in the House of Commons, it would have been negligent of the Secretary of State not to have planned for a no-deal Brexit. The one thing that is for sure is that the Secretary of State cannot be blamed; maybe the Prime Minister can. Does the Secretary of State agree that a lot of people are making political points based on no evidence whatever?

Chris Grayling: That is the central point. The process was carried out properly in the context of the legal advice that was available and the needs elsewhere in Government. My Department never needed any ferry capacity; it was procured because other Departments did. If further contracts are let, it will be because of other Departments’ needs for services such as the national health service. The Opposition seem more interested in trying to score political points than in supporting the securing of drug supplies for the national health service.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On 11 February, the Secretary of State said in response to my question on ferry procurement:

“I have been absolutely clear that this procurement was dealt with very carefully by officials in my Department and in the Treasury”—[Official Report, 11 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 623.] Although the Secretary of State may believe that this matter was dealt with very carefully, I think the rest of the world believes otherwise—that, in fact, he has reached dizzying new heights of incompetence. His latest bungle has cost an extra £43 million, on top of the £2.7 billion he has cost us so far. If P&O wins its case, how much more is the Secretary of State going to cost the taxpayer, and will that be the point at which he finally accepts that he has no choice but to resign?

Chris Grayling: The right hon. Gentleman does not believe in Brexit and he clearly does not believe in no-deal preparations. He also clearly did not listen to me previously. I have set out exhaustively in this House why we took the decisions that we did and why we responded in the way we did to the legal advice we had. We simply took steps to ensure that we were ready for a no-deal Brexit—the responsible thing to do. He might not agree with it, but that is what we have done.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to reduce the amount that has to be paid to the ferry companies involved?

Chris Grayling: That is an important point. We have paid a reduced cancellation charge, as set out in the original contracts in the case that we did not need the ferries as a result of a change in circumstance. The change in circumstance, of course, is that the potential no-deal date has moved by seven months. Nobody seriously expects that we would be paying to have ships either sailing empty or moored at the quayside for that time, but the companies incur costs—by leasing extra ships and taking extra staff—that have to be met. At the start, we negotiated a cancellation level of payments, meaning that we did not have to pay the full amount in the contract and mitigated the cost to the taxpayer of the insurance policy that we took out.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The private sector has no faith in the Department for Transport’s ability to undertake procurement properly; confidence has been lost. Is the Secretary of State concerned that his own incompetence will reduce future private sector investment in the transport sector?

Chris Grayling: I do not know what the hon. Lady is talking about because she is not being specific. She says that the private sector has lost confidence in the Department’s procurement, but that tends only to be the case if people have not won a contract.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have continually voted for the deal, as the Secretary of State knows. The insurance policy protects exports from and imports to the UK, so I fully accept what he is saying. Will he join me in trying to get a change to the procurement rules, so that they include a substantial element of alternative dispute resolution to make the whole thing cheaper and quicker?

Chris Grayling: I regret that any big company—particularly in the case of Eurotunnel—would take a decision to pursue a legal action at such a time, when the Government are seeking to operate in the national interest. But the law is the law, and we have to fulfil it. I agree with my hon. Friend that alternative dispute resolution is a good way of resolving such matters, when it can be delivered.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The criticism is not that preparations should not have been made; it is criticism of the way in which the contracts were awarded. The Secretary of State is doing his usual trick of standing back and saying that he is the innocent bystander in this situation. Is he actually saying that he just followed the advice of his officials and signed this off, or did he intervene and overrule, especially to ensure that Seaborne Freight were awarded a contract? Or is he just going to hide behind others and say, “It was somebody else’s fault, guy—not mine,” as he did with the train timetable idea?
Chris Grayling: I can categorically say that I did not intervene in any matters relating to the decisions to let these contracts, how they were let and what the recommendations were about letting them.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my frustration with those in this House who, I think wrongly, rant that a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic but then oppose every single step taken to try to mitigate any of the concerns that it might bring about?

Chris Grayling: The bit I do not understand is that Labour Members do not appear to understand insurance. When someone takes out a home insurance policy each year, they pay their money and they do not get it back. It costs them money, but they have the insurance to protect them against an unforeseen eventuality. We took out this insurance policy because of a change to the forecast that suggested that we might have a problem in dealing with the flow of drugs for the national health service. That was the responsible thing to do—to take out the insurance policy for the country. Labour Members might not want us to do that. They might not want to look after the interests of the national health service, but we will.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State calls it an insurance policy, but I do not know what part of an insurance policy involves paying £33 million in an out-of-court settlement to a company because of his own incompetence. That is not really a viable and prudent form of insurance policy. Is not the reality that the Government were never going to have no-deal in the first place and that this has been the mother of all smokescreens by the Government to raise the stakes in effectively playing poker with taxpayers' money? It is a flagrant misuse of public funds, and he should at least have the grace to admit that.

Chris Grayling: I will not, because it is not true.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the reality is that cancellation fees are a standard aspect of contracts that exist between the Government and private sector suppliers to cover the costs that are legitimately created when a contract occurs?

In the event that cancellation takes place, it is perfectly reasonable for those costs to be covered; otherwise people would not contract with the Government.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It underlines one of the things that makes the business community much more concerned by a Corbyn Government than by Brexit, because Labour Members not only do not understand business—they hate business and do not believe that the Government should work with business. We hear time and again how dismissive they are of business, and this is just another example.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Do the Government's interesting U-turns reflect a change in their attitude and policy towards Brexit itself?

Chris Grayling: Our policy has been consistent from the start: we want to leave the European Union with a deal. We will continue to work to do so but will make appropriate plans for all eventualities.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We all knew that a no-deal exit might happen, but none of us could have said that it would definitely happen. So I do not know which is worse: whether the Secretary of State has overseen contracts that did not have the flexibility and caveats built into them to allow for that eventuality, or whether he refuses to admit that that was a mistake. Whatever it is, this combination of incompetence and arrogance is costing the taxpayer a lot of money. What assurances do we have that as we approach the October deadline and he begins over the summer to look at this process again, he will learn from the mistakes and not waste even more money?

Chris Grayling: That is precisely why these contracts had early cancellation provisions that enabled us to close the contracts down at a cost that was much lower than the full cost of the contracts.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. We come now to the business question, which is not as heavily subscribed as is often the case. Therefore, I think I can say with complete conviction that this session should finish no later than 1 o'clock and preferably long before then.
I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, and I wonder whether the portrait of Baroness Thatcher will be taken out of her room and put on display. Baroness Thatcher was a scientist, and we know that the science is right on climate change.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the Opposition half-day next week. With debates on the Wild Animals in Circuses (No.2) Bill and on the 25th anniversary of the death of John Smith, former leader of the Labour party, the subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

I previously asked the Leader of the House whether we could have a debate on the Non-contentious Probate (Fees) Order 2018, so that we can have proper scrutiny of it. The mum of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) is a probate lawyer, so she is quite keen to see the order debated.

We are breaking records again, with the longest time without a Queen’s Speech. I do not know whether the Leader of the House has raised this at Cabinet meetings, but can she confirm whether the Queen’s Speech will be in June or September, as some people have mooted? The Prime Minister’s spokesperson has said that there is “no specific date” for a new Session. This is a bizarre state of affairs. I do not know of any other Government being run like this, particularly as there have been only five years since 1900 in which a Queen’s Speech has not taken place. It feels like the Government do not want to or cannot get their legislative agenda through Parliament. When is the withdrawal agreement likely to be debated again? Will that be an ordinary debate or part of a new Queen’s Speech?

We list the Prime Minister’s engagements, and I wonder whether we should now list her dinner engagements, too. There was ladies’ night this week, and someone donated £135,000. That is £19,285.71 for each of the Cabinet Ministers there. The previous donation by that donor was ruled impermissible by the Electoral Commission, but I understand that she now has leave to remain and is on the electoral register. Two former Home Secretaries and the Immigration Minister were at the event, and I hope there is no link between the two.

While Ministers were having dinner with the donor, the Department for Work and Pensions was sending misleading letters to GPs and doctors stating that their patients do not need a fit note any more when they have been found fit to work. The lack of clarity about when GPs should issue fit notes could put patients’ finances and health at risk. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who is the shadow disabilities Minister, raised a point of order because the Secretary of State said that the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners have signed off these letters, when in fact they have not. They put out a letter yesterday saying that they have not. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State on exactly what the status is of these letters to GPs, and will they be withdrawn or updated?

While Ministers were having dinner with the donor, schools and teachers were having to pick up the costs of Government cuts. An NASUWT poll has found that two out of three teachers add their own cash to squeezed school budgets by paying for classroom stationery. That is the reality: it is not the Opposition who are saying it; that is the reality from teachers on the ground. May we have a statement on why teachers and staff in schools...
are using their own money to keep schools running? The Government will say that they have had record investment, but that is clearly not the case on the ground.

While Ministers were having dinner with the donor, the Government were failing criminal barristers across the country. Some 95% of members of the Criminal Bar Association have threatened to begin walking out of trials and are refusing to take on new work over a pay dispute with the Crown Prosecution Service, and 84.2% of respondents to a Criminal Bar Association poll said that they were in effect working for less than the minimum wage, while the workload has increased over the past five years. May we have a statement on the criminal barristers’ pay dispute? After all, it is about the very foundation of our society.

The current Secretary of State for Transport, who was previously at the Ministry of Justice, oversaw all those cuts to the legal system, and he is the one, as we heard in the urgent question, paying out £50 million of public money, on top of the £33 million out-of-court settlement with Eurotunnel. I think we could ask schools what they could do with that money. When will we get a statement on the accountability for this waste of public money?

Last week, the Leader of the House wished everyone well in the local elections, but she did not say that there are no district or borough elections in Northamptonshire because the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has cancelled them. The seven district and borough councils would have been holding elections, but apparently the Secretary of State said that people might get confused when they move to the unitary authorities, so they will not get any elections until 2020. With no vote until 2020, people will not get a vote on the 5% increase in the council tax.

I want to take this opportunity to thank those councillors who are standing down in Walsall South: Keith Chambers, who was a councillor for Bentley and Darlaston North; Allah Ditta, for Palfrey, who may be back as a councillor to serve his community; and Eileen Russell, for St Matthews. Eileen was a teacher, and every time I go canvassing with her I find that she had taught practically everybody in St Matthews.

I do not know, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether you know the significance of 29 May. That is the date in St Matthew.

I add my [Valerie Vaz]
You will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the Prime Minister went to Brussels and, on her own devices, decided to keep us in the European Union past 12 April, until 31 October. This House has not had a chance to debate or vote on that. At the last business questions, I think the Leader of the House said that she would allow the prayer from my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and that we would have a debate and vote on the negative statutory instrument. Will the Leader of the House confirm when that will happen?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to address this issue again. He may be aware that our hon. Friend asked that this debate be allowed me to address this issue again. He may be aware that the House shall have thought that there were council by-elections in England today, given that every Member on the Opposition Benches, other than the Whips, is either from Wales or Scotland? [Interruption. I] said Wales.

I thank the Leader of the House for saying that we will be proceeding with the refurbishment of this place. For most of this country, R and R means rock and roll, but in this place it means restoration and renewal. I think we will all get on down with R and R in this place soon.

I was intrigued by the Leader of the House’s response to the inquiry of the shadow Leader of the House about the Queen’s Speech. We are only a few weeks from what should be the end of this parliamentary Session, but apparently there is no intention to bring forward a Queen’s Speech. The parliamentary Session has now lasted two years and is about to enter its third. We can talk about having too much of a good thing, but probably not when it comes to this government. They have said there will be no Queen’s Speech until the withdrawal agreement is agreed, but that timeline ranges from months to weeks to about never, so I would be interested to hear her thoughts about when we can expect a Queen’s Speech.

We are acutely aware that if there is a Queen’s Speech, some loyal Members of her Majesty’s Back Benches may feel obliged to vote it down in a pique of Brexit rage, so we are looking forward to more weeks of business like this: conjured up Bills, Opposition days and—I mean no disrespect to my good friend the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns)—more Backbench Business debates. There will be no new substantial legislation and no new programme of Government. To call this a zombie Government would be to show massive disrespect to the brain-eating living dead, and the purgatory that we will now endure in the business of the House is acquiring a semi-permanent nature.

May we have debate about when a Government can no longer call themselves a Government? This Government have now lost almost half their ministerial team. They are running out of people to promote, and even more Back Benchers are saying, “No thanks” and want nothing more to with this shambles. I do not know how much longer that can be sustained or endured. There seems no prospect of a general election—even these zombies will not vote for a zombie Christmas to put them out of their misery, and the Prime Minister seems to limp on from week to week. Perhaps it is now time for Prime Minister “Shaun of the Dead”, and the full, unleashed zombie apocalypse to come.

Andrea Leadsom: How does one respond to that, Madam Deputy Speaker? I was hoping that the hon. Gentleman might allude to the fact that he is after Mr Speaker’s job. Had he raised that issue in the context of next week’s Bill, which will ban wild animals in travelling circuses, I could have questioned him about whether he in fact hopes to be the new ringmaster, or the new greatest showman. Since we all absolutely love Hugh Jackman—well I do anyway—I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman could completely fill his shoes, but I would be willing to give it a try, particularly because he said that if it came to a tie he would vote against Scottish independence.

Pete Wishart indicated dissent.

Andrea Leadsom: Oh I think he did.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Among many other things, yesterday was National Gujarati Day in India. I was privileged to be at the Indian high commission last night as we joined celebrating not only what is going on in the economic powerhouse of India but the contribution of the Gujarati people in the UK and across the world. Wherever Gujaratis have made their home, education, entrepreneurship and family life have improved, as has law-abiding behaviour. Will my right hon. Friend make time for us to debate the contribution made by Gujaratis to the United Kingdom, especially given that only in the past few days we have held excellent debates about the contributions made by Jains and Sikhs? It is time to celebrate what those in the Gujarati community have done for this country since they chose to make it their home.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an excellent proposal, and I agree that the Gujarati community has made a significant contribution to the United Kingdom. I pay tribute to him for raising that issue on behalf of his constituents. He might wish to seek a debate in Westminster Hall so that all hon. Members can share their experiences.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and particularly for Thursday’s Backbench Business Committee debates on acquired brain injury—that debate is sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—and on the 25th anniversary of the death of the late John Smith, leader of the Labour party. Only last summer, I had the privilege of visiting John Smith’s graveside on the beautiful island of Iona, and I am glad that we will commemorate his loss, which was a tragedy for the Labour party and for British politics.

If we are allocated time on 16 May, we already have two debates lined up. One is the previously postponed debate on the definition of Islamophobia. That is time-specific to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, so we would be very grateful to get that debate.

When we come back after a bank holiday, we change the sitting hours so that on Tuesday the Chamber sits with Monday hours. The times in Westminster Hall are
a variation of that, so instead of starting at 9.30 am, it
starts at 11.30 am, but on a Monday Westminster Hall
does not start at 11.30 am. That makes life difficult for
those who wish to participate in those debates but have
to travel from further afield, including Members from
the north of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland,
Wales, and the south-west. May we have a look at that
issue, because it is rather unfair if Members who wish to
take part in debates at 11.30 am on a Tuesday following
a bank holiday have to travel down the night before, as
that is not the case for all Members across the House.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes a good
point, and I am happy to look into it. Perhaps I can
meet him to discuss it further. I will bear in mind his
point about 16 May, as I was disappointed that the
debate on Islamophobia had to be pulled due to the
number of statements on that day. It would be good to
see that debate reinstated, as well as the other one he
mentioned.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I know that the Leader
of the House will be seized with the importance of
dealing with the climate emergency we face, and she will
agree that this place must show leadership in achieving
net zero emissions as soon as possible. Let me make
three immediate suggestions. First, the Independent
Parliamentary Standards Authority should allow carbon
offsetting as part of travel expenses; secondly, those
travelling on House of Commons business should be
steered towards low-carbon transport options where
available, or otherwise have their carbon offset by the
House authorities as part of those travel arrangements;
and thirdly, IPSA should make available a one-off fund
for the installation of energy efficiency measures and
other clean tech in our constituency offices, so that we
can decarbonise our efforts beyond here.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes excellent
recommendations, and since 2010 the Government have
been delivering on our ambition to be the greenest
Government ever. I look forward to introducing the first
evironment Bill in more than 20 years, and I will
certainly take seriously his recommendations about what
more Parliament can do. I myself always choose to
take travel by broomstick since I am so frequently accused of
being a witch. I find it a very low-carbon, green form of
travel by broomstick since I am so frequently accused of

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes a serious
issue, and she is right to do so. As ever, if she wants to
write to me about a particular case, I can take it up on
her behalf. Otherwise, I suggest she seeks an Adjournment
debate, so she can raise the issue more generally with
Ministers.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Delays, mistakes,
lost documents, extortionate application fees, and being
on the receiving end of a default mode of suspicion is
the experience, every single week, of my constituents in
their interactions with the Home Office. Will the Leader
of the House ask the Home Secretary to make a statement
on the systemic failures of his Department and say what
he will do about them?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes a serious
accusation, and hon. Members frequently raise particular
constituency problems. I am always sympathetic to
individual issues, and have raised a number of them on
behalf of Members with the Home Office directly. If
she wishes to seek a more general discussion about the
way the Home Office manages visas and so on, I encourage
her to seek a Westminster Hall debate or raise the issue
directly during questions to the Home Office.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Earlier
this week, “radiotherapy for life” organised an excellent
venture in the Palace of Westminster. My wife is a
therapeutic radiographer who treats patients with cancer
on a daily basis, not just in Brecon and Radnorshire but
throughout the Welsh borders, and I remind Members
that one in four of us will require radiotherapy treatment
at some time in our life, and 40% of cancer cures are
thanks to radiotherapy. May I have a debate on what more
we can do to help those excellent medical professionals
carry out their job and to encourage more people to
take part in debates at 11.30 am on a Tuesday following
a bank holiday have to travel down the night before, as
that is not the case for all Members across the House.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes a very serious
issue, and she is right to do so. As ever, if she wants to
write to me about a particular case, I can take it up on
her behalf. Otherwise, I suggest she seeks an Adjournment

debate, so she can raise the issue more generally with
Ministers.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a
debate on Yemen? My constituent Luke Symons is
being held captive by the Houthis in Sana’a. Despite the
efforts of the Foreign Secretary, the United Nations and
others, that is still the case and his family are becoming
increasingly exasperated. The new Minister did promise
a meeting before Easter with me and the family. That
has not materialised, and I have not yet heard back from
his office. Will the Leader of the House use her
good offices to encourage that meeting to take place as
soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes a serious
issue, and she is right to do so. As ever, if she wants to
write to me about a particular case, I can take it up on
her behalf. Otherwise, I suggest she seeks an Adjournment

debate, so she can raise the issue more generally with
Ministers.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman that there has been no progress on the
meeting. I will certainly make contact with the Department
again and remind them of that commitment. As all
hon. Members know, the world’s worst humanitarian
catastrophe is taking place in Yemen. The UK Government
are doing an awful lot to try to find a way forward. I am
sure they will be very happy to speak to the hon.
Gentleman.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Delays, mistakes,
lost documents, extortionate application fees, and being
on the receiving end of a default mode of suspicion is
the experience, every single week, of my constituents in
their interactions with the Home Office. Will the Leader
of the House ask the Home Secretary to make a statement
on the systemic failures of his Department and say what
he will do about them?
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Leader of the House values the contribution that faith communities make to our society, so will she arrange for a Home Office Minister to urgently come to the House and explain why recent changes to the tier 5 visa system will make it more difficult for churches and temples to bring in supply ministers over the summer? Catholic churches in my constituency are very concerned—the issue is on the front page of the archdiocesan newspaper—and she will know that the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) raised this matter with the Prime Minister. When will a Minister come and explain this unnecessary and unexplained change of policy?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly recall my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) raising the matter at Prime Minister’s questions. If I recall, the Prime Minister said that she would ensure that it was considered. I will also take steps to ensure that the Home Office are aware of this concern. If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me with any specific examples, that would be helpful.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): In January, the Department for Work and Pensions announced draft regulations for compensation payments for those who have moved from universal credit and lost their severe disability premium payments. Three months on, there is no movement from the Government and in the meantime vulnerable constituents are suffering. When can we approve this much-needed support for severely disabled people?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have sought at all times to put people with disabilities at the heart of our policy. The intention behind introducing far greater personal independence was to provide better support for people living with disabilities. Hundreds of thousands more disabled people are now in work than there were in 2010, giving them the opportunity to earn an income and contribute to society as a whole, as they wish, in society as a whole.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have sought at all times to put people with disabilities at the heart of our policy. The intention behind introducing far greater personal independence was to provide better support for people living with disabilities. Hundreds of thousands more disabled people are now in work than there were in 2010, giving them the opportunity to earn an income and contribute to society as a whole, as they wish, in society as a whole.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. Deafness is incredibly difficult for people to live with and the Government have sought to take strong steps to improve quality of life, the inclusiveness of services and so on to try to support people who suffer from deafness. The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important issue and I recommend that she perhaps seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can share their ideas.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not think so cruelly of the Leader of the House. I think of her more as the Wizard of Oz. Hmm. I know she dismisses the whole issue of how long the parliamentary Session has gone on for, but in the old days we used to have a new parliamentary Session every year. The Government laid out their programme and then we debated it. Opposition and Government Members had the chance to hold the Government to account. We had a new process of starting private Members’ Bills with a new ballot, and we had a fixed number of Opposition days and days for Backbench Business. All that has gone out of the window. Today, we are sitting for the 296th day in this Session, which makes it the longest Session of this Parliament since the Glorious Revolution in 1688. I think that that is a mistake. We used to get two weeks’ business in a row. Now we get just three days’ business in a row. I know she will say, “Oh well, it is because there are all sorts of important things that you shouldn’t have to worry about,” but the truth is that we all have constituents. We like to make commitments to our constituency. Some of us have important medical appointments. I have heard of male and female Members who want to go to a screening, because they are over 50 or over 45, but have not been able to make a commitment to do that. In the interests of everybody’s health, will she please get back to a proper process of having a Queen’s Speech every year and announcing the business two weeks’ in advance?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman, if I was the Wizard of Oz, could certainly be a munchkin. He would be very welcome in that role.

Valerie Vaz: He’s Dorothy!

Andrea Leadsom: No, I do not think he would see himself as Dorothy at all.

Chris Bryant: A friend of, anyway.

Andrea Leadsom: Indeed. With the red shoes, no doubt.

Chris Bryant: Ruby slippers!

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. He will be aware that at the beginning of this Session we announced that it was going to be an extended Session because we had a significant amount of Brexit legislation to get through, as well as a very packed domestic legislative programme. That remains the case and we keep the end of the Session under review. He talks about announcing two weeks of business. There is no specific convention around announcing the future business. It has been the case for a very long time that the period of future business announced depends on the predictability of future business. If this House were to embrace the opportunity to deliver on the will of the people as expressed in the 2016 referendum and vote to leave the European Union, we could get back to normal. We could end the Session. We could move on. We could all start talking about something else. I therefore encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to think again about voting for the withdrawal agreement Bill when it comes back.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Perhaps the best comparison to the Government are the white walkers in the “Game of Thrones”.

May we have two statements? First, may we have a statement on what the Government are doing to try to resolve the industrial dispute between Interserve employees...
and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? Secondly, may we have a statement on why those Interserve employees, who were due to be paid for their work in April, have not been paid? The suggestion was that their pay dates would be changed to June. That does not seem to have been the case. We now have some of the lowest-paid workers left unpaid for their work in the FCO. Does that not demonstrate that Interserve is unfit to deliver public services?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government take very seriously any private sector provision of public services and ensure at all times good value for taxpayers’ money as well as proper safeguards. We have Foreign and Commonwealth questions on Tuesday 14 May. I encourage him to ask his specific question then.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I know that we will all welcome the fact that the Transport Committee is conducting an inquiry into road safety, but it strikes me that it has been a heck of a long time since we have had a debate on road safety issues in this House. One particular concern of mine is excessive speeding and driving bans, or in many cases the lack of driving bans. I can think of some examples in north Wales—a car going at 122 miles an hour and a bike going at 138 miles an hour. I believe that they were both on single carriageway roads in rural areas. I am really concerned about this issue. Will the Leader of the House please consider having a debate on it in this Chamber in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises the incredibly important issues not only of top speeds on single-lane roads but of people speeding through towns, past schools and so on, creating dangerous situations. I absolutely encourage her to go to the Backbench Business Committee and seek a debate, so that all right hon. and hon. Members can make their views known.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma—DIPG—is the second most common type of primary high-grade brain tumour in children, affecting around 40 children each year in the United Kingdom. It is not amenable to surgery, and radiotherapy is only for palliative purposes. Only 10% of children affected survive longer than two years after diagnosis, and that prognosis has not improved in the past 40 years. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on the need to increase funding for research into DIPG, to further improve and enhance recognition and treatment of this devastating illness as we approach DIPG Awareness Day on 17 May?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. Quite often in the House, colleagues raise rare and unusual forms of cancers and other illnesses, and it is absolutely right that they do that. While we can all be proud of the significant increase in people surviving cancers in general, it is concerning, as she says, that those survival rates have not improved in many decades. Health Question Time is on Tuesday 7 May, and I encourage her to raise her issue directly with Ministers then.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the concerns of the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) about clergy visas, which have also been raised by priests in my constituency. While churches are a critical part of our communities, many other aspects are also important, particularly our high streets. I commend Scran, a new café on Alexandra Parade in my constituency. It won the Scottish entertainment and hospitality award for best café in Scotland, despite being open for only seven months, which is a great achievement for its staff after all their work. Could we have a debate in Government time about the critical role of high streets and small businesses in our communities, and what we can do on business rates and VAT restrictions on those businesses to maximise the environment in which they can flourish and form an important part of our town centres, high streets and cities?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises pieces of great news from his constituency. I congratulate the café he mentions for its contribution. He is absolutely right that thriving high streets and community hubs are a vital part of all our lives, and he is right to pay tribute to his constituents. The Government are determined to ensure that we do everything we can, through our advisory council and our reductions in business rates and so on, to support our high streets. I recommend that he seek a Westminster Hall debate, so that all hon. Members can share their experiences.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Leader of the House may be aware of the Parliamentary Review, which is apparently a key fixture in the political calendar; it is so important that the foreword is provided each year by the Prime Minister or the Chancellor. Staff of Alite Systems, in my constituency, have been asked to appear as experts in this year’s review and to attend a grand ball full of political dignitaries. However, the reality is that they are being asked to purchase a £3,300 advertorial. Can we have a debate on the merits of the Prime Minister and politicians associated with this publication being involved in what is, frankly, a money-making exercise?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that sounds of concern. I am sure he will have taken this up directly, in his own way, with the Prime Minister’s office. However, I think it is absolutely right that Ministers write forewords for important documents and reviews. He has not mentioned the purpose of this particular one, but I am sure he will find a way to perhaps raise a parliamentary question about its appropriateness.
World Immunisation Week

12.34 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Immunisation Week.

It is an enormous privilege and pleasure to stand here for the first time as Secretary of State, but it is a deeper pleasure to be in the Chamber talking about immunisation. Immunisation is an extraordinary story that illustrates why international development really matters, how complicated it can be, in public policy terms, to pull off, and how important it is to be able to communicate to the public and others how, in the end, preventing the terrible loss of a child from polio can be connected right the way back to scientific research, businesses, international co-operation, and very brave doctors and health workers on the ground.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I be the first person in the Chamber to warmly welcome the Secretary of State to his new post? It is a delight sometimes to see a square peg in a square hole—if that does not sound rude, somehow or other. I warmly congratulate him on his new job.

Is not one of the most disturbing developments of recent years the fact that there are politicians around the world, in some of the most advanced societies, who preach an anti-immunisation message, which will lead to the unnecessary death of children?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. It is grossly irresponsible and, I am afraid, profoundly and disturbingly misleading, and even ignorant, to go around doing that. It ends up stoking public paranoia and fear, and leads to the unnecessary loss of life. From the beginning, the story of immunisation—and, indeed, the story of international development—has often been about challenging public perceptions and irrational fears, and following through. There are reasons for that. The heart of what immunisation is carries within it the seeds of that challenge. The basic idea of immunisation is, of course, to make somebody sick to make them better. From the very beginning, that has involved not only challenging public fears, but something that Governments find quite difficult: taking risks and working, genuinely and collaboratively, internationally.

Although we tend to pat ourselves on the back a great deal in this country, immunisation was, of course, not a European discovery at all. It was a Chinese discovery of the early 16th century. Chinese public health officials, or their 16th century equivalents, went into villages and sneezed into people's mouths, which rapidly reduced the mortality rate by tenfold or twentyfold. The normal mortality rate for smallpox was 20% to 30%, but remember that that reduced mortality rate under the new technique was still between 0.5% and 2%, so the procedure was very risky. Moving on with my international point, this immunisation practice arrived in Britain in about 1700.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I give way to the honourable and learned doctor.

Dr Whitford: I, too, welcome the Secretary of State and congratulate him on his new post. It was actually a bit more dramatic than that: variolation involved cutting into veins and putting in smallpox scabs. That did indeed make people ill, and then they were immune. However, modern vaccines do not do that—they are no longer based on making someone ill. There is a fallacy that the flu vaccine will give people flu, but it does not. Modern vaccination is no longer based on giving someone an illness to protect them from worse.

Rory Stewart: Moving rapidly forward, the key to this is scientific advances whereby things become safer all the time. Immunisation moved from China to Britain, and in 1799 in Britain, there was the development of vaccination—in other words, the use of cows to do this. There were then the developments of Louis Pasteur in the 1880s in France, and then of course the amazing developments in the post-war period.

Throughout all that, we see something that really matters for the Department for International Development, a Department that co-operates with other countries and puts science at its heart. This story, which in its early history links China to Britain, Britain to France and France to the United States, continues today with Gavi, the global alliance. In all this work, the same themes occur at an accelerated rate. We have, remarkably, achieved the eradication of smallpox, and we are close to a 99% success rate on wild polio. But it is on Ebola that we see most clearly today the security risks, the scientific advances, the complexity and the international co-operation.

In 2015-16, DFID, working with other international partners, began to develop—initially in Guinea, and then, through academic partnerships, in the United States and Canada—the first attempts at inoculation against Ebola. Ebola, like all such diseases, finds no borders, and that has a direct connection with justifying the international aid budget here in the United Kingdom. Perhaps the easiest way of explaining to people why we have an international development budget is to point out that had that disease taken off in Liberia and Sierra Leone, given modern transport mechanisms it would have found its way rapidly to Europe and ultimately to the United Kingdom, and people would have been dying here.

That investment, which seems quite complex, and which often—particularly in the case of diseases such as wild polio—involves spending a surprising amount of money on tracking down the last few cases, is the kind of investment that only a Government can make and only an international aid budget can provide. Why? Because this is not a normal economic case. If an individual were asked whether they wanted to spend a lot of money on inoculating themselves, they might say no, and on the basis of a traditional cost-benefit analysis, one might ask, in relation to that individual, “Why are you spending so much money?” The point is, however, that that individual is part of a community, and that community is part of a broader nation. If the disease takes off, it will begin to infect hundreds of millions of people. At that stage, significant investment in preventing someone from getting polio, for example in rural Afghanistan or Pakistan—there can be quite surprising investments, ending up with the spending of hundreds of thousands of dollars on tracking down the last few cases—is critical if it actually prevents millions of people from getting the disease.
The same applies to Ebola. The issue raised by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about how we deal with fears is central to the tragic death of a very courageous doctor, who was killed when bringing a vaccine and treatment to people in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He originally came from Cameroon. Part of the same story is the killing of public health nurses on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border when they were trying to inoculate people against polio.

In the solution to this, then, is human courage, and in the driver of this is human suffering, but in the broader story are things that we have to communicate. Pharmaceutical companies, which we are often nervous about, can play an incredibly positive role if properly harnessed. Merck, which is developing some of this vaccination, has a structured contract with Gavi to deliver 350,000 vaccinations, on hold, at any one time. We have reduced the price of vital drugs from $4 to $2, which means that we have access to twice as many people. We have worked out how to use the fact that Britain is the global leader in Gavi. Britain puts in 25% of the funds for this extraordinary global programme of vaccination. The second biggest contributor is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the third biggest is the Government of the United States. All that makes our money go much further, and tied into it are the World Health Organisation and some of the best universities and researchers in the world.

In telling the story of immunisation, we are telling the story of international development, and in telling the story of international development, we are telling the story of international co-operation: the fact that researchers from China and Europe can come together; the fact that brave health workers on the ground in eastern DRC risk their lives delivering vaccines; and the fact that a single child in eastern DRC who was saved from death, with their family saved from the horror that they would have experienced, can be traced back to money spent by British taxpayers, alongside people from other countries. It has meant bringing in the private sector, the best academics in the world and, above all, brutal, bruising practicality: how do we make sure that the refrigeration is right in eastern DRC so that the vaccines survive in transport; how do we get the electricity to ensure that the vaccination works; how do we deal with communities, politics and conflict to get to the front line; and how do we understand the political and economic structures on the ground so that we can make sure that the local mullah or village chief in Afghanistan will not block the arrival of the polio vaccine in that community?

Get all those things right and we protect Britain from dying from Ebola. Get all those things right in the world of climate change and we can potentially save the planet. Get all those things right and we can show how our international aid budget can touch everyone in this country, re-energise a younger generation, and prove that if we can sometimes do less than we hope, we can do much more than we fear.

12.45 pm

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I genuinely welcome the new Secretary of State to his role. In his first two weeks as Prisons Minister he visited both the prisons in my constituency, which I thought showed a great sense of responsiveness to what was needed at the time. I hope that something along the same lines, and a close working relationship, will feature in his new role. I am also delighted that he used his first speech as Secretary of State to advance a robust intellectual defence of our aid spending, and I congratulate him on that.

We know why immunisations matter and why today’s debate is so important. Vaccines are, quite simply, a matter of life and death. Between 2 million and 3 million lives are saved every year thanks to immunisations, and in recent decades they have drastically reduced suffering caused by infectious diseases that were once commonplace. Smallpox was completely eradicated in 1977 through a global vaccination programme, and the world is now close to eradicating a second disease, polio. My own grandad contracted polio and lived with it for 27 years, and when I was growing up I heard a great deal about the impact of a disease that paralyses the people affected by it. I pay tribute to one of my constituents, Andy Gilliland, a polio survivor who has lobbied alongside the One Last Push campaigners; I am delighted to have become one of the campaign’s polio champions since he lobbied me.

Thanks to successful vaccination schemes the world over, today’s generation and our children do not have to suffer from the diseases that were all too commonplace for our grandparents. Immunisations are not only saving lives, but are a cornerstone of global health security. They are vital to the achievement of several of the United Nations sustainable development goals and to ensuring that no one is left behind. They also provide a vital gateway to wider public health services. If you are a child or parent being given a vaccination, this may be the first time that you interact with the public health system. The simple act of being immunised can boost your chances of going on to access important services such as family planning, birth registration, testing and screening, and regular healthcare. For the hardest to reach, immunisation can be the start of proper inclusion in the public health system.

I am proud that the UK’s Department for International Development is a world leader in global health. That has been possible only because of the House’s commitment to spending 0.7% of our national income on overseas aid and to maintaining an independent DFID. However, I want us to do more. Twenty million children around the world are still under-vaccinated. Fewer than 10% of children in the world’s poorest countries receive all the vaccinations that they need. In Africa alone, more than 30 million children under five suffer from vaccine-preventable diseases every year, and more than half a million of those cases result in death.

Sadly, in recent years global immunisation rates have stalled, and in some places have even decreased. Key barriers to full immunisation include the high prices of vaccines, and a growing movement of vaccine hesitancy. It is clear that we still have our work cut out if we are to reach all children, across the world, with the essential vaccinations that they need and deserve.

As the Secretary of State said, next year Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, will be up for replenishment at a conference hosted by the Government here in London, and this year the Global Polio Eradication Initiative is being replenished at a conference in Abu Dhabi. The UK should make significant pledges to make sure both are fully funded, and should make the pledges promptly enough to encourage other donors to do likewise. I therefore

---

hope the Minister will use today’s debate to update the House on the Government’s replenishment plans for both of these funds.

Let me be clear, however, that replenishing funds is only one step to ensuring all children are vaccinated; we can and must do more. Gavi is leaving millions of under-vaccinated children in middle-income countries without all the vaccinations they need. That is because the scheme uses a country’s GDP to determine whether it is eligible for support. This is a crude way to assess need: a country’s GDP does not take into account the specific needs of that country and its population’s health needs. It fails to take into account the state of its health system, and, crucially, GDP measures do not take into account in-country inequalities.

Rory Stewart indicated assent.

Dan Carden: The Secretary of State is nodding, and I appreciate that.

This means many of the world’s poorest children are in fact living in middle-income countries with a GDP that makes them ineligible for either official development assistance or Gavi support. I hope the Secretary of State will listen to the all-party group on vaccines for all, which has called for Gavi to bring about new criteria beyond a country’s GDP.

Let me now turn to another major threat to universal immunisation coverage. It is a threat that we face both here in the UK and right across the world: vaccine hesitancy, a phenomenon that the World Health Organisation has not only warned is on the rise but has now identified as one of the top 10 major threats to global health for 2019. This year’s theme of “Protected together: vaccines work!” also points to the difficulties in this area.

Since 2014, the number of countries reporting hesitancy has steadily increased, and in 2017 only 14 countries out of 194 reported no vaccine hesitancy. In England, dangerous false stories about immunisations are routinely spread on social media. The likes of YouTube and Facebook are failing to clamp down properly on those who peddle these lies. We must take tougher action and tell the truth about immunisations because the increasing refusal of vaccines has been described by the head of NHS England as a “growing public health timebomb.”

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government’s recently published online harms consultation needs to include the briefing up of this, and that Facebook and others must be held responsible if they allow such anti-immunisation scare stories to be included on their platforms, because, as we are seeing in America, this is risking and costing lives?

Dan Carden: I agree with my hon. Friend. This is absolutely critical, and our discussion shows the importance of raising awareness in such debates.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making some extremely good points. Does he agree that it is also important to be positive and show the huge impact of past vaccination programmes? In the 1940s, diphtheria killed 3,500 children a year in the UK, but it now kills approximately zero. Showing what has happened in the past and how beneficial it has been for our children will, combined obviously with other measures that the hon. Gentleman has referred to, give us the confidence that vaccination is indeed the way forward to protect our children.

Dan Carden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and the figures in graphs and elsewhere in documentation show the remarkable impact that vaccinations have had. We must carry that story forward.

We know from this experience how vital universal public services are for ensuring that everyone in society, regardless of their income, can realise their right to a healthy life. The Labour party founded our national health service. We are today, like then, committed to a health service that is that publicly owned and publicly run and with universal access. Universal health systems are the building block for everything else: without them we cannot reach full immunisation coverage; without them we cannot protect all the population against the national security threat of disease; without them we cannot reach the poorest and most marginalised in society with the care they need; and without them we cannot invest properly in the health of everyone equally, or deliver the fullest benefit for our society or our economy. And crucially, without universal public health systems, countries cannot fight the soaring inequality that now exists the world over.

There is no greater public asset here in the UK than the NHS, and so too around the world people value and look to the founding principle of the UK’s NHS: health care available to all, regardless of wealth. And so I want to briefly mention two important commitments that the Opposition have made to how we would deliver aid and development differently.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important point about the massive positive impacts of public health campaigns, and I am reminded of the great public health drive in Glasgow to eradicate tuberculosis from the city in the 1960s, a public awareness campaign that was a huge success. But is my hon. Friend aware that this creeping cynicism around the positive benefits of immunisation is a critical national emergency, and does he agree that it is worth exploring making it a criminal offence not to immunise our children? Perhaps we should explore whether that is a necessary step given the critical nature of this.

Dan Carden: I agree with my hon. Friend. This is absolutely critical, and our discussion shows the importance of raising awareness in such debates.

Mr Paul Sweeney: Is he talking about giving parents and GPs given the investment they need to drive up vaccination rates.

Mr Paul Sweeney: They are providing a platform that is fuelling a new public health crisis. Labour wants to see the £800 million of public health cuts reversed, more health visitors recruited to provide proper health advice backed by science to parents and GPs given the investment they need to drive up vaccination rates.

Mr Paul Sweeney: Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope you will call me later on; I have to make a brief point about the importance of universal health care, and I will be brief.

Mr Paul Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman has referred to, give us the confidence that vaccination is indeed the way forward to protect our children.

Mr Paul Sweeney: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and the figures in graphs and elsewhere in documentation show the remarkable impact that vaccinations have had. We must carry that story forward.

We know from this experience how vital universal public services are for ensuring that everyone in society, regardless of their income, can realise their right to a healthy life. The Labour party founded our national health service. We are today, like then, committed to a health service that is that publicly owned and publicly run and with universal access. Universal health systems are the building block for everything else: without them we cannot reach full immunisation coverage; without them we cannot protect all the population against the national security threat of disease; without them we cannot reach the poorest and most marginalised in society with the care they need; and without them we cannot invest properly in the health of everyone equally, or deliver the fullest benefit for our society or our economy. And crucially, without universal public health systems, countries cannot fight the soaring inequality that now exists the world over.

There is no greater public asset here in the UK than the NHS, and so too around the world people value and look to the founding principle of the UK’s NHS: health care available to all, regardless of wealth. And so I want to briefly mention two important commitments that the Opposition have made to how we would deliver aid and development differently.

Mr Paul Sweeney: Is he talking about giving parents and GPs given the investment they need to drive up vaccination rates.

Mr Paul Sweeney: They are providing a platform that is fuelling a new public health crisis. Labour wants to see the £800 million of public health cuts reversed, more health visitors recruited to provide proper health advice backed by science to parents and GPs given the investment they need to drive up vaccination rates.
Aid is, or at least should be, delivered on the basis of poverty reduction. The Labour party has committed to a second, dual goal—to use aid to tackle inequality, too—and we know there is no better way of bringing about greater equality than universal public services in health, education and other key services. It is a tragedy that while we have our national health service—our own best-loved institution—created by the post-war Labour Government, this Government sometimes use UK aid to export to developing countries the kind of botched privatisation models that have done so much damage in the UK in recent years, instead of helping those countries to secure their own universal public health services.

I have a simple message: as DFID Secretary I would use UK aid to work alongside communities and civil society groups across the global south who are fighting for their own universal public services, and I would use DFID’s resources to work in partnership with their Governments to build and strengthen them.

World Immunisation Week is a chance to celebrate the work being done to protect people from vaccine-preventable diseases and to highlight the challenges ahead and the collective action needed. This international awareness week promotes the core message that the immunisation of every child is vital to prevent diseases and protect life. Immunisations are one of the most successful and cost-effective global health interventions of our time. Delivering immunisations gives all of us in this House, as custodians of the UK’s important position as a leader in global health, the simple, remarkable ability to save countless lives.

12.59 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to welcome my very good friend the Secretary of State for International Development to his new role. We all know what a tremendous background he brings to this role, with vast international experience beyond the majority of us, and we all know the dedication he has put into his previous ministerial roles, and we are certain that we will see this reflected in what he does with international development. I am delighted to see him in his place. I am also delighted by the further progress of his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), who is now Secretary of State for Defence. She did a terrific job at DFID, and I am really pleased to see her in a post for which I think she has always been destined, bearing in mind her background. She will do a great job there. It was a great pleasure to work with her.

Not unusually for me, I find myself largely in agreement with the speeches that have been made from both sides of the House. I should like to say little bit about a topic for which I had responsibility in the Department until relatively recently and to offer thanks to colleagues who have been so effective on this and who will give great support to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development.

First, a personal word: as some hon. Members know, I have a very personal connection with vaccination, for which I had responsibility in the Department until relatively recently and to offer thanks to colleagues who have been so effective on this and who will give great support to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development.

Jeremy Lefroy: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I would like to pay tribute to Rotary as well. I remember when my family was living in Tanzania and my daughter was born there, she was vaccinated against polio through a programme sponsored and funded by Rotary International, as were millions of other children in that part of the world. Rotary deserves huge credit for what it has done, and I thank the Rotary clubs across the United Kingdom for the money they have raised for that programme.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks for all of us in the House in thanking Rotary.

I also want to thank one or two more people while I am on my feet. The first is the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations for all, who will no doubt speak later in the debate. She makes a tremendous contribution on these matters in the House on all available occasions. I also want to thank Danny Graymore, who heads up the global funds team and is our senior DFID rep in Geneva, for all the work that he puts into this, as well as the team of colleagues in DFID who work so hard on this. I offer my deep appreciation to them for all that they have provided for me in the last couple of years.

I also want to thank Gavi’s chief executive, Seth Berkley, who does a remarkable job, and Henrietta Fore at UNICEF and her team in the UK. They do a tremendous job in vaccinating and in providing the vaccines and the basis for what both Front-Bench speakers have talked about. UNICEF vaccinates half the world’s children and saves 3 million lives a year. Since Gavi came into existence, it has vaccinated some 700 million days in the United Kingdom, we provided jabs for polio, not sugar lumps. Yes, I am that old. As my dad knows, we are talking serious needles; not the sort of thing that children get these days. These were really serious needles that bubbled away in the steriliser in the corner of the surgery, and they absolutely terrified this small boy. My dad had to chase me round his room. I would hide under the desk, eventually I would be brought out to see all the things that were meant to entertain me as he put the needle in. Then he did it. The lesson I learned from that was that if my dad, who loves me very much, could inflict a degree of pain on his crying little boy, there had to be a really, really good reason for it. And of course there was. Like the grandfather of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), I was spared polio, as were the vast majority of my generation and subsequent generations, because of that vaccination. That first early introduction to vaccination and needles, and the visits with my dad to hospitals that I thoroughly resented for many years—until I did a stint at the Department of Health—have stayed with me, so vaccination matters to me. It is an important thing.

My father subsequently got involved with Rotary International, and any discussion of vaccination and global health has to include a mention of the contribution that Rotary has made to the near-eradication of polio. The United Kingdom remains absolutely supportive of that policy, and we must not get so close to the line but then fail to drive it over. The contribution of Rotary International and its members in this country must always be recognised, and we should thank them most sincerely.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks for all of us in the House in thanking Rotary.
children and 10 million lives have been saved, for the reasons that have been set out. We could not do without them.

Nor could we do without the health workers who are out there doing their job but, as those on both Front Benches have mentioned, they are under increasing threat. A specific example is Pakistan, where work is being done on polio. There has been a string of attacks in recent years, with seven policemen being killed in Karachi recently while trying to protect polio workers. In February 2015, four kidnapped polio workers were found dead near Qetta. In June 2015, 15 were killed by a suicide bomb outside a polio vaccination centre. Four were killed in 2014 in Qetta, and in 2012, five were killed in Karachi and Peshawar. This is not just about the threat of intimidation to health workers in different parts of the world; it does actually result in their injury and death. We in this country should always remember what it is like in some of those places. We should remember how important those people consider their work to be and why they consider it to be of such benefit to their communities that they would take such extraordinary risks.

I am proud of the part that the United Kingdom plays in Gavi, the global vaccine alliance. It brings together the private and public sectors in a shared goal of creating equal access to new and underused vaccines for children in the world’s poorest areas. It has strategic goals, which are all of importance to the United Kingdom and illustrate why we support it. The first is to ensure equitable uptake and coverage of vaccination. The second is to ensure effectiveness and efficiency as part of a strengthened health system. The third is to be part of the sustainability of a national vaccine programme.

At this point, I want to comment on what the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton said about DFID’s role in health systems abroad. This cannot all be done purely through the support of public sector health systems. The combination of private and public in health is absolutely vital, but he can be reassured that the determination of the UK Government and DFID is to strengthen universal healthcare systems. Money and support for healthcare must go into that, but there is a combination of public and private, as was made clear at a meeting with UNICEF in New York in September. It is a partnership, but this does not contradict the fundamental principle on which I am sure the hon. Gentleman and I are united.

Jeremy Leffroy: Does my right hon. Friend agree that state co-ordination is sometimes needed, but that there are different systems? If we look at Zambia, we see that the Churches provide tremendous health coverage throughout the country, but they do so in co-ordination with the state so that everybody knows, as far as is possible, that they have coverage locally. Clearly, they have a long way to go, but they do a tremendous job in co-operation with the Government there.

Alistair Burt: Absolutely, and I think that that is the model to take forward for the development of healthcare systems. We need to bear in mind the nature of that relationship, because it will be absolutely key.

I am proud of the United Kingdom’s support for Gavi. We are its largest donor, and we are “currently responsible for 25% of its budget. The UK has committed £1.44 billion to Gavi from 2016 to 2020, including funding to its innovative finance mechanisms. This investment fully delivers on the UK commitment to immunise 76 million children and save 1.4 million lives by 2020.”

I am grateful to the team for the briefing it gave me for the meeting with the all-party group, which I have kept. Credit where it is due: that was a quote from the Department’s own briefing. The replenishment conference is coming up. There was very little I could say about that when I was a Minister, but speaking from the Back Benches, I can say to the Secretary of State that I am sure we will sort it out and I hope he will be really, really generous. He can be absolutely sure that I will be on his tail if we do not make a serious commitment to Gavi, because it really delivers. Seth Berkley delivers for us, and the visit to Bognor Regis in the past few months when he saw the work being done here was really important. I hope the Secretary of State will bear that in mind.

Vaccination does more than the obvious function of preventing diseases in children. Its background, not only in the health system but in the development of countries, is fundamental. A healthy child goes to school, is able to learn, and grows into a productive adult. Unless that basis for immunisation is clear, so much development work is stymied right at the beginning. Immunisation is part of a sustainable, integrated health system. The reasoning is that the overall impact is that every £1 spent on immunisation leads to a £16 saving in terms of subsequent health care bills and people’s inability to interact effectively in the community.

Before I deal with the threats, I want to remind the House of what this is all about, and I will talk briefly about measles, because measles outbreaks have suddenly returned in recent times. The tendency in the United Kingdom is to accept measles as a rudimentary childhood suffering that is easy to go through, so the misery of measles is forgotten. A recent piece in Forbes Magazine talked about the problems of anti-vaccination and included a quote from Roald Dahl. His oldest daughter, Olivia, died of measles in 1962 at the age of seven, and the article quotes his words:

“one morning, when she was well on the road to recovery, I was sitting on her bed showing her how to fashion little animals out of coloured pipe-cleaners, and when it came to her turn to make one herself; I noticed that her fingers and her mind were not working together and she couldn’t do anything. ‘Are you feeling all right?’ I asked her. ‘I feel all sleepy,’ she said. In an hour, she was unconscious. In twelve hours she was dead. The measles had turned into a terrible thing called measles encephalitis and there was nothing the doctors could do to save her.”

That is how real it is. When we talk about vaccination and take on those who are concerned about it, that is the reason.

Measles has largely died out in the United Kingdom, but it is coming back in different places, and it will come back here unless we challenge it. The United States declared measles eliminated in 2000, but there have been 695 cases this year, mostly concentrated in small tightly knit communities. The rise in measles cases in both the developing world and the developed world is really frightening, and it must be challenged.

When I was first made aware of the rising figures, I had a discussion with my ministerial team about how to deal with it. I have to say that I was pretty gung-ho and thought, “We’ve really got to take this on aggressively.”
The team, to their credit, tried to scale me down from that, saying, “There are different reasons for the threat to vaccination, and you need to handle them differently.” That was good advice, and my sense is that the challenges are as follows. The first is the straightforward matter of incomplete coverage—the millions of children who do not currently get vaccinated. Gavi needs to look at where it is developing its resources, but it is committed to go to the poorest areas, and we need to keep that up. We need to deal with the areas where coverage is not great, but there are other threats, too.

We can divide anti-vaccination into several categories. First, there are religious reasons. I am unaware of any tenet in any major religion that suggests that vaccination is inherently wrong. It is quite the reverse. As a practising Christian, I believe that one of the revelations of God has been to give us the skills to discern what harms us and what helps us. That is where science and medicine come in, and vaccination is part of that. We have been given the skills to be able to help our God-given children and keep them healthy.

No major religion contradicts that, but sects in various religious denominations are against it. When we do get an outbreak, such as in an Orthodox Jewish community in New York, it runs around quickly. The United States has seen recent outbreaks in the Orthodox Jewish community, among Slavic migrants, in the Amish community in Ohio and the Somali community in Minnesota, because measles spreads quickly in a small, closed group and then it affects anyone else they come into contact with outside who has not been immunised. The United Kingdom should urgently work with religious leaders worldwide and say, “Please make a declaration to ensure that none of your leaders—none of those who promote a faith under your auspices—are in any way in contact with outside who has not been immunised. The United Kingdom should urgently work with religious leaders worldwide and say, “Please make a declaration to ensure that none of your leaders—none of those who promote a faith under your auspices—are in any way in any doubt about the value and importance of vaccination and say that there is no religious tenet against it.”

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of the terrible measles outbreak in Israel? Many rabbis, including those in Orthodox communities, have come forward to point out that the Torah talks about the preservation of one’s own life and the lives of others. They are trying to counter what has almost become a habit, rather than something that is based on holy writings.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have not been able to discern whether a poor El Al flight attendant who fell seriously ill in the past couple of weeks has recovered, but I am aware of that outbreak. Religious leaders, rather than Government figures or civil spokespeople, need to make the case. We can deal with the religious factor by understanding the fears and trying to descale them so that no one can go to a religious group and find some reason to campaign against vaccination.

A second reason might be conspiracy, which has certainly been an issue in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where those trying to disrupt the vaccination movement say that it is being influenced and designed to harm. All that can be done in response to that is more and more information and transparency, and Governments do have a responsibility there. It must be made absolutely clear that health workers are not to be used for any other purpose, so that there is no risk of any political contamination. We are aware that it has happened, but it must not happen again. If health workers are not to be targets, they must purely be health workers.

Thirdly, there are medical reasons why a vaccination may not be appropriate for a particular child. These are exceptionally rare, and there is scientific evidence to back that up and it must be handled purely through the medical profession. We have been asked this past fortnight to listen to the science. Whether on climate change or anything else, we should listen to the science. When it comes to medical reasons why vaccination may not be right, listen to the science and recognise how incredibly rare those reasons are. Someone is much more likely to protect their child by vaccination and immunisation than not.

The last reason is misinformation, which is really scary. This is part of the phenomenon of people trying to pull down authoritative sources of information—the mainstream media, experts or whatever. If someone wants to disregard something to try and minimise its impact, it is becoming popular and easy to claim that their own personal experience or anecdotal experience somehow trumps what people are being told by those from scientific backgrounds who are making a serious case. We are seeing an awful lot of that.

The issue follows from the false, discredited and debunked information about the MMR vaccine that came from a doctor in the United Kingdom some years ago, which is used by so many. The issue seems to be extremely prevalent in the United States, where picking up ideas that have little foundation but can be used to inflame people seems to be almost a way of life for some. It is seriously dangerous and anti-expert. It is based on a false dilemma between liberty and the state, which we can see creeping into arguments here on social media. It is all highly dangerous.

Now, there may be other ways of combating the other problems that I have mentioned, but I am afraid that we do have to be aggressive on misinformation. We have to be vigorous and gung-ho. It is nonsense, and we must be clear about taking it on. False information and those who provide it must be exposed, and those who have fallen victim to it must be understood and given as much information as possible.

I recently saw a good piece on the “Victoria Derbyshire” programme in which a couple who were uncertain about vaccinating their child were given the opportunity to question people about it and, in the end, they came to a different conclusion. It shows how worried people are, and we should understand that, but there are answers to their worries and we should not be afraid of making sure people have those answers. We must be clear about those who are deliberately spreading misinformation, who are connected to arguments that have no basis or who are trying to bring together issues of liberty and public health, which is particularly prevalent in the United States, where almost anything provided by the state is somehow suspect—a view I do not hold, as most in this House know. Public health programmes are good, and those who say it is all the state trying to control people are just wrong. That has to be challenged by every means possible.
Immunisation is good. It works and it has proved itself. It is one of the building blocks of world strength and world health and we lose it at our peril. Recent years have taught us that, just because we think something has become part of mainstream culture and is accepted by everyone, it does not mean that the argument does not have to be made over and again. We have lost valuable things in recent years by not vigorously making the argument for them because we thought everyone understood the argument—I will not go into detail—but we are not going to lose the argument on health and immunisation. If we do so, we would put ourselves at risk. We know it is safe and we know it is good, so let us not leave it to others to make the argument. Let us make the argument ourselves. I know that I can completely count on the Secretary of State and the Minister of State to do that job, and I know that I can rely on this House to do the same.

1.21 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome this debate in Government time on such an important topic as World Immunisation Week. It is just a wee bit tragic that it has been scheduled today, clashing with local government elections, and that therefore the Chamber is so empty when I am sure that many Members would have liked to have taken part.

This topic is of particular interest to me, and I am glad to see in the Chamber other members of the all-party group on vaccinations for all, which I chair. As the Secretary of State mentioned, the history of vaccines goes back long before Jenner to the Chinese empire. Indeed, it was common practice to carry out variolation in the Ottoman empire, too. There is documentation from travellers and the East India Company going back 100 years before Jenner.

At that time, smallpox epidemics were common and a third of people who caught it died. It is hard to get our heads around those numbers. Smallpox left survivors very scarred and damaged, and Jenner followed up the observation that milkmaids were noted for having beautiful skin. Of course there was the fallacy that milkmaids bathed in milk, and there is all the imagery of Cleopatra having bathed in milk, but it is simply that milkmaids tended to catch cowpox, which protected them from smallpox. The word “vaccine” comes from the Latin for “cow.”

Smallpox was declared eradicated across the world in 1980, and we are within touching distance of eradicating polio. Eradicating a disease from the world is an incredible achievement and could not be done using any tool other than vaccination.

The vaccinations for polio came in after five huge epidemics, which were visible here in the UK, between 1945 and 1960. Instead of about 500 or 600 young children a year being affected by polio, the figure went up to 5,000 or 6,000, with about 750 deaths. We got the Salk vaccine, the injectable vaccine described by the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). I was not quite born when that vaccine came in, and I was lucky enough to get the Sabin oral sugar cube version. The oral vaccine had the huge advantage of being able to vaccinate large numbers of children very quickly and, because it was excreted in faeces, it spread protection within communities—it was an accelerated way of carrying out vaccination.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative was established in 1988 and, as has been mentioned, the Rotary Club played a huge part in the UK. At that time, there were still 35,000 cases worldwide every year. Some 2.5 billion children were vaccinated under the programme, and at least 10 million cases of paralysis have been prevented.

Last year, there were 35 cases, and as we have heard, they were predominantly in difficult areas on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where a friend of mine worked for UNICEF for several years—the area is very challenging. The other area where we are not sure what is happening is northern Nigeria, because it is difficult to get data. There has always been this problem of warzones, of extreme poverty and even of communities that we hardly know exist.

The last case of wild polio in the UK was in 1984, and at that time we changed back from the oral vaccine to the injectable vaccine because it uses a dead strain that is not attenuated or weakened and cannot induce polio. As has been said, the UK can be proud of being the lead contributor to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and to the global health fund—the UK is a big supporter of many of these programmes.

The last 10 years, which are being called the decade of vaccines, have seen at least 20 million lives saved, and vaccination is the single most successful health intervention ever. People will say that that is clean water, a civil engineering intervention that does bring health, but if we look at the returns and the lives saved, vaccination is even more successful.

The problem is that uptake is falling. We are lucky in Scotland to have managed to keep the uptake of childhood vaccinations above the World Health Organisation’s recommended level of 95%, which is critical to creating community protection for children who are very young, for babies who are only a few months old and are not yet vaccinated, and for those who are vulnerable for various reasons and cannot be vaccinated.

Unfortunately, the uptake of many childhood vaccines has dropped below 95% in England because of what is described as “vaccine hesitancy”. As has been mentioned, the UNICEF report refers to about half a million children in the UK being unvaccinated. That is a dangerously large pool of children and, now, of young people and perhaps even middle-aged adults who are exposed to catching these diseases.

People often put that down to the anti-vax campaign but, actually, Public Health England’s research suggests that the situation is much more complicated. When it surveyed parents, it found that only quite a small percentage had a strong anti-vaccination feeling. There are also issues of complacency and of access, which we need to tackle so that we shrink it down, as well as the need to tackle head on the fake news we see on social media.

There is complacency simply because vaccines are a victim of their own success. People do not see the awful impact of these conditions. As the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire mentioned, people think of measles as trivial, like a 24-hour flu—they have forgotten what it means. People do not see many cases of polio, but I remember it from my childhood. I was lucky enough to visit vaccination projects in Ethiopia with Results UK. When we pulled in to get petrol, we saw a young man, aged about 30, with obvious flaccid paralysis from polio, and it hit me between the eyes that
that is something that we do not see. If people saw the results of polio, they would never think of withholding the vaccine from their children.

We think that there are not great risks from infectious diseases and that antibiotics will treat them, but air travel brings the risk of pandemics. The Secretary of State mentioned Ebola, and when we had a huge Ebola outbreak a few years ago, work was started on a vaccine that has been used to prevent recent outbreaks from reaching the levels we saw in Sierra Leone five or six years ago.

It is important that we realise that antibiotics are not a solution. They do not work on viruses. The only option to prevent dangerous viruses is to use vaccines, and there is also increasing antibiotic resistance.

On access, as the shadow Secretary of State mentioned, across the world we are putting ourselves on the back for the fact that in poorer countries 85% of children are getting the basic vaccines. However, we have stalled—the figure is not climbing and has been at that level for a long time. When the all-party group produced its report on vaccination for all in the developing world, I was shocked to find that only 7% of children in such countries are given the full WHO 11 vaccines.

As global players prepare their next strategies and funding plans, and with the eradication of polio on the horizon, this is a time to step back and think about how we are going to help, across the world, to eliminate more of these diseases. We need to aim for the fully immunised child. We need to come up with strategies to deal with remote areas and warzones, and research is a crucial part of that. It is brilliant to read that the trial of a new malaria vaccine is beginning in Malawi. It is expected to be only 40% successful, which is quite weak for a vaccine. However, malaria is so widespread that it causes more than 400,000 deaths a year, so making 40% of children immune to it will, along with the other manoeuvres and actions being undertaken, such as the use of nets and anti-mosquito treatments, help to bring that number of deaths down.

We face access issues here in the UK. A busy parent may have several children and although the first baby may get all its immunisations, the second and third might not. That can be an issue in some of the religious communities that tend to have large families. Someone who is having their seventh, eighth or ninth baby may struggle to look after the others and get the new baby to its vaccinations. These people need easy access to their GP, nurse or health visitor, and those people need to have time to answer parents’ concerns. We are talking about one of the first big decisions a parent will make about their child and they are seeing all this swilling anti-vaccine rhetoric on social media. They need to be able to ask questions, and then not to be patronised or dismissed, but to have their questions answered.

Although uptake in Scotland is high, at above 95%, when we drill down into the situation, we also see variations in areas of deprivation and in religious and cultural communities. We are therefore not complacent, and Scotland is embarking on a vaccination transformation programme, because keeping the rate high, and indeed improving it, will require concerted action. Sometimes this is about policy decisions. When the meningitis ACWY vaccine was introduced for 14-year-olds at school, Scotland carried out a four-year catch-up, immunising 14 to 18-year-olds, whereas Wales did a two-year catch-up. Sadly, the advice in England was that teenagers, young adults and university students could go to see their GP. At a recent event, it was reported to me that uptake was only 40%—after all, how often are teenagers at their GP? This is not a concerted way to proceed. I do not know whether the decision was based on cost, but analysis of the cost-effectiveness of vaccines shows that they are so cost-effective as to justify any process that will actually raise uptake, even home visits to try to help a busy mother to get her babies vaccinated.

The third thing to mention is the anti-vax campaigns. As I say, Public Health England surveys suggest that we are talking about a relatively small proportion of people, and the situation does seem largely to stem from the MMR—measles, mumps and rubella—vaccine. The vaccine is 97% effective, but uptake fell dramatically after Andrew Wakefield’s paper in 1998. He has since been struck off the medical register and his research was completely discredited, yet he is being given a platform in the US again as President Trump is promoting this in America. While uptake has improved, a cohort of teenagers were not given the MMR vaccine when they were babies and they are particularly vulnerable.

As Members have heard, people think that measles is trivial, like a 24-hour flu, yet 2.5 million people died from it in 1980. The figure came down to 73,000, its lowest point, in 2014, but last year the number of worldwide deaths from measles had increased to 110,000. Sadly this year, by only 2 May, 112,000 young people worldwide have lost their lives to measles. It is literally the most contagious disease, and if there is a local outbreak, 90% of unvaccinated people will get infected—it is unavoidable. People are incredibly infectious before there is a rash and the disease is spread simply in the air. During a recent outbreak in America, it was found that patient zero had infected more than 40 people before he even knew he had measles. Last year, we saw 82,000 cases in Europe and 72 deaths. There will a similar number of encephalitis cases, as was mentioned by the former Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire. The disease leaves children with brain damage, and it can leave them blind and deaf. Those are not minor sequelae, but life-threatening things.

In England, thankfully, there have not been any recent deaths due to the disease, but whereas in 2017 there were 259 cases, that had increased nearly fourfold to almost 1,000 last year. In Scotland, we had only two cases, and they involved people who had been travelling outwith the UK. That did not start an outbreak, because we had 97% uptake of the vaccine, so community protection was in place and there was no opportunity for the disease to spread. Community protection is crucial. I know that people use the term “herd immunity”, which sounds awful, because it sounds like animals, but we are talking about community protection that allows us to protect our babies under one year old and our most vulnerable.

Even the uptake of the meningitis vaccine, something parents were campaigning for in this House just two years ago, is now only at 92.5% in England. Parents have an image of meningitis. They may know people who have had it and they will certainly have seen the appalling photographs of a child who is dying of meningitis and meningitis sepsis. In Scotland, the uptake is still at almost 96%, but we face the same issues of anti-vax...
sentiment; for many vaccines, we also see a drifting down of a few points every year. We cannot allow that to become critical, so we need open dialogue with parents. We must not push their concerns under the carpet, as that simply breeds a greater sense of conspiracy and leaves them open to these terrible social media campaigns.

Just two years ago, the O’Neill report on antibiotic resistance highlighted how crucial antibiotics will be in the future in fighting antibiotic resistance. At the moment, antibiotic resistance causes 700,000 a year, but it is estimated that we will have 10 million a year if we reach a truly post-antibiotic world. As a surgeon, I can tell the House that many procedures simply cannot be carried out if we do not have the ability to protect with antibiotics.

Most antibiotics have a lifespan from development to resistance of less than 10 years—the longest have a lifespan of less than 20 years before we see resistance—yet we are using vaccines that are 70 or 90 years old and do not have resistance. It is crucial that we tackle this anti-vax idea if we are ever to tackle antibiotic resistance. This is particularly the case for respiratory infections, because that is where the greatest use of antibiotics is. There are three ways in which vaccines will help us on this. The first is simply by preventing a drug-resistant infection in the first place. Secondly, they will also prevent the secondary infections from viruses and other conditions, where, again, we are using antibiotics. Thirdly, they will help in respect of viruses, where antibiotics are not going to work in the first place. It is important to realise that vaccines are absolutely central to that battle.

We now see vaccines preventing cancer. A study in Scotland looked at the effect of HPV, partly because we had such good uptake of the HPV bivalent vaccine, and also because our cervical screening started at 20. That study has shown an 85% reduction in precancerous changes on the cervix, which means we are on the road to seeing a really dramatic fall in cervical cancer. Having watched one of my friends lose her daughter to cervical cancer at 28 just a few years ago, I know that eliminating that disease is worth it in its own right.

We will be moving on to directing vaccines against cancer itself, and there is huge potential in vaccines to be realised as we tackle other diseases and scourges, such as multi-drug-resistant TB, but we will realise that potential only if we can tackle the anti-vaccination campaign and re-establish real confidence among parents, not just here but around the world.

1.41 pm

Bambo Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is a fellow member of the all-party group on vaccinations for all.

Let me start by giving some context. Vaccinations have been around for a long time, with evidence showing that the first form of vaccination for smallpox occurred in China approximately 500 years ago, but it was not until 1796, when English physician Edward Jenner published evidence showing that his smallpox vaccine was effective, that vaccinations in the west really took off. Since that time, vaccinations have been hugely successful in preventing numerous infectious diseases. In the past 100 years, we have seen vaccinations successfully prevent diseases such as diphtheria, tetanus, anthrax, cholera, plague and typhoid, and more recently polio, measles, mumps and rubella.

Many of us will remember receiving vaccinations at school and thinking nothing of it, but the diseases that those vaccinations prevented could have killed us had we been born decades previously. It is safe to say that immunisation has stood the test of time as one of public health’s most cost-effective interventions, saving up to 3 million lives every year. It is estimated that between 2011 and 2020, vaccines will aver an estimated 20 million deaths and 500 million cases of illness.

Since its inception in 2000, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, has contributed to the immunisation of more than 690 million children and helped to prevent more than 10 million deaths by virtue of its ability to acquire vaccines in bulk and to enable access to those vaccines by the world’s poorest countries. The United Kingdom is one of Gavi’s global partners, and through it UK funding has helped to immunise 76 million children against vaccine-preventable diseases, saving 1.4 million lives over the past 19 years.

There is no doubt that without sustained access to vaccines, disease outbreaks and pandemics would be inevitable. With the annual global cost of a severe pandemic being roughly $570 billion, or approximately 0.7% of global income, vaccinations are the best financial option available for fighting pandemics. The World Health Organisation has estimated that between 2001 and 2020 the economic benefits of vaccination could reach up to $820 billion.

On top of the distribution of and process of providing vaccines, and as well as the benefit of patients’ physical immunity to various diseases, there is also a long-term benefit in the establishment of strong primary and public healthcare systems in places where vaccinations are a new introduction in the fight against diseases. With my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), I was recently part of a delegation to Ethiopia organised by RESULTS UK to look into how Ethiopia is tackling the prevention of tuberculosis. I was impressed by the health system there, in particular the excellent health extension workers, who provide immunisation in the more rural parts of Ethiopia, such as Bishoftu. They store vaccinations in solar-panelled refrigerators. The public health message conveyed by these dedicated health extension workers and community health workers was clearly working well, as were the distribution hubs that delivered the medicines to the outposts in the most efficient manner possible. The people of Ethiopia can be very proud of how they have reduced infectious diseases, and I am sure that they will strive to eradicate infectious diseases altogether.

Huge progress has been made in the virtual eradication of certain diseases through immunisation. For example, cases of wild polio have been reduced by 99.9% since 1988, down from 350,000 cases in 125 countries to just 33 cases in just two countries in 2018. Despite that, millions of children still miss out on basic vaccines, and one in 10 children around the world still receive no vaccines at all. According to figures from the advocacy organisation RESULTS UK, only 7% of children in the poorest 73 countries receive all 11 of the WHO-recommended vaccines, and almost 40% of unvaccinated children—approximately 8 million of them—live in fragile humanitarian settings.

The success of the prevention of infectious diseases through vaccinations has meant that the world has become a healthier, more prosperous place to live. As
infant mortality decreases, there is a risk in presuming that immunisation is a done deal and that political and financial investments could be put to better uses. We must make sure that we are not complacent in assuming that the problem has been solved, as complacency would be incredibly detrimental and risks putting millions of lives at risk. We are already seeing immunisation rates fall across many countries, as they reduce the funding for immunisation once they reach a certain level of reduction of infectious diseases, only to see rates then rise and so have to start again from the beginning.

We have the knowledge, resources and expertise to prevent millions of unnecessary deaths every year, yet in Africa alone more than 30 million children under five suffer from vaccine-preventable diseases every year, and more than half a million of those cases result in death. Disparities in immunisation coverage and equity across and within countries mean that children from the poorest families, from the most remote areas and from marginalised groups continue to be left behind, with only 7% of children in the poorest 73 countries receiving all 11 of the WHO vaccines.

For example, there is still a problem in getting vaccines to children who belong to pastoral, rural communities, because despite some of the best and most ingenious refrigeration techniques, it proves difficult over the last mile to keep the vaccinations at the right temperature so that they do not degrade. It is now essential that global immunisation efforts prioritise reaching those who are left behind and currently receive no vaccines at all. These children must be reached with vaccines and other health interventions to ensure that we meet the sustainable development goals and that the UK meets its “leave no one behind” targets.

A changing world means that a large proportion of under-immunised children are located in middle-income countries or fragile and conflict-affected states. We must ensure that our aid investments are fit for purpose and can reach these children, no matter where they are. The UK should be focused on reaching the poorest children, not the poorest countries. We must also not forget that malnourished children do not respond as well to vaccinations.

To ensure that vaccines are most effective, investment in infrastructure is vital. Strong and functioning health systems are required to deliver vaccines. It is essential that at the same time as investing in immunisation systems, we invest in strengthening health systems. This will enable more vaccines to reach more children and allow for the easier introduction of new vaccines. Gavi must continue and increase its investment in its work to strengthen health systems, because missing every child with free vaccines requires multiple points of contact with a health system and offers the opportunity to increase access to multiple health services, such as nutrition, making vaccines excellent value for money and central to achieving universal healthcare.

Polio funding has had a far-reaching impact by, for example, supporting 70% of global surveillance systems and funding health workers who deliver other essential vaccines and health interventions. But polio eradication efforts could be compromised as countries struggle to mainstream polio essential functions into weak health systems. Domestic resource mobilisation and country ownership are key to managing the transition, yet in the 16 polio-priority countries, the average Government expenditure on routine immunisation within immunisation budgets is just 31%.

The UK must continue to prioritise polio transition as an issue to ensure not only a polio-free world, but that it is working with countries to help them understand and plan for a transition away from polio funding. I ask the Government to redouble their commitments to vaccinations and to make ambitious commitments to financing Gavi and the GPEI in their upcoming replenishments over the next 18 months and remain a leader in the global immunisation efforts.

I also ask the Government to ensure that the focus of global immunisation efforts is on reaching those left behind who currently receive no vaccines at all. We need to ensure that all investment in immunisations is focused on strengthening immunisation systems so that every child receives the full schedule of recommended vaccines.

Great progress has been made in eradicating infectious diseases, but we must not be complacent and we need to ensure that we keep our eye on the ball and do all we can to help those in the hardest to reach and poorest areas to get the vaccinations that they need.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):

On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank you for your indulgence and seek the forgiveness of Members present for this extremely worthy debate this afternoon for barging in mid-way through it with this point of order.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that earlier today the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Minister for the Cabinet Office responded on behalf of the Government to an urgent question concerning leaks from the National Security Council. The Minister said several times from the Dispatch Box that the Government would co-operate with any police investigation, but during those proceedings the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, made a public statement in which she said that the police could start proceedings of an investigation only if they were requested to do so by the Cabinet Office, the Minister for which was on his feet at that time. He must have known when he was on his feet responding to Parliament’s questions that that was the case—that there could be no co-operation with a police investigation if the Government had no intention of asking the police to proceed with one.

Given that there is a degree of being casual with the facts, shall we say, may I ask you whether the Minister could come back to the House to clarify exactly what the Government’s position is and what their role might be in getting what many in this place believe to be pivotal, which is the police to investigate the entire sorry affair?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It will be no surprise to him or to the House to hear me say that, of course, what Ministers say at the Dispatch Box is not the responsibility of the occupant of the Chair. From the Chair, I cannot answer the point that the hon.
Gentleman raises. What I will say is that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office is most assiduous in carrying out his duties in this House and is never shy about coming to the Chamber when there is a matter that he has to address. I have every confidence that if the hon. Gentleman uses the usual methods of taking forward the point that he has raised, and if there are matters to be discussed further by the Minister in question, I have no doubt that that Minister will assiduously as ever carry out his duties and come here to this House and answer those questions.

1.54 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is truly a pleasure to follow not only my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), but the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) and all the Front-Bench speakers, and I am sure that the summing up speeches will also be a pleasure to hear. It is truly a pleasure—a constructive pleasure—to be able to say during a debate in this place that there have been excellent contributions from everyone in the House. We have already come to various points of consensus and agreement. We can all point to things that need to be done, as well as to places that we can learn from and successes that we can celebrate. I will try to confine my remarks to areas that have not been covered by others—I always try really hard not to repeat things that other people have already said. I will focus mostly on antimicrobial resistance and the relationship with immunisation.

In the 1970s, when I was nine, I went to India for the very first time. Just like the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire, who described his experience with his dad, I can still remember the pain and discomfort of the vaccinations. I can also remember much more clearly the impact of seeing someone with elephantiasis when I reached India, and of meeting a relative who had been affected by one of the deadly diseases, which she had survived but which had left her permanently disabled, that I had been vaccinated against. It was a really visceral experience of the connection between the discomfort and pain of the vaccination and the consequences of not having access to that vaccination. It was also a real-life experience of inequality—the fact that I had received that vaccination because I was a UK citizen, and the people whom I met in India at that time were not getting those vaccinations. The experience transformed me and my understanding of what vaccinations did. Obviously, I was a child, so I was transformed from being a child without information to being a child with a really strong sense of the importance of vaccination. As an adult, I have been left with a real passion about the value of vaccinations, particularly in the way that they eradicate inequality as well as disease.

I am glad that this debate falls under the Department for International Development rather than the Department for Health and Social Care; it is an interesting place from which to be discussing this matter. Others have already provided examples of diseases, such as smallpox, and also polio, with its permanent debilitating effects. Polio is a good example of a disease that has been virtually eliminated in most countries through widespread vaccination, but still circulates partly because the symptoms are not easily recognised in certain parts of the world. The value of vaccination is so crucial in those diseases where early signs are not necessarily clear or where infection can be transmitted before there are early signs, such as in the case of measles, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned.

While I cut out from my speech things that others have already said, I will also add something about the decision not to vaccinate a child. The hon. Lady was absolutely right: we must not patronise parents. If they have valid questions, they must be heard, and if they have worries, they must be understood. The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire mentioned certain specific examples of why we have to listen to people. Obviously, we can be gung-ho in our attitude, but not in our interactions. I apologise for being personal about this, but it occurred to me that if someone said to me right now that there was someone in the Lobby who could vaccinate me against ever having cancer again, I would not be seen for dust. We would all rush. We would have no question. We probably would not even stop to ask what the side effects would be. We would be out there immediately. It occurs to me that in our lived memory, we have lost the understanding of the fact that measles is also a deadly disease. Hearing the right hon. Gentleman read out that account from Roald Dahl was really moving and served, perhaps, as a reminder of the issues, or even as new information to many parents who are fortunate enough to live in a world where measles is no longer in front of us—in this country certainly—causing those deaths.

Dr Whitford rose—

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Lady, who is about to intervene on me, gave us examples of how it still is an issue in some parts of the world.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. As I said at the end of my speech, there are researchers who are actually working on the ability to vaccinate against cancerous cells. This is something that we will hopefully be seeing in our lifetime. Is it not then surprising that, in England, even the uptake of the meningitis vaccine, a disease that parents are terrified of, has fallen down to just 92.5%, which means that the community protection is not there.

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I do find that baffling, but that does reinforce the point that she and the right hon. Gentleman made about listening to people’s worries and concerns. We will not get very far if we barge through them saying that they are wrong—they are wrong, but we need to listen to where those concerns come from and to try to address them.

Take the influenza vaccination, for example. I declare an interest, in that one of my sisters has to have this vaccination every year because of problems with her immune system. Influenza is a disease about which many of us nowadays would think, “I’ll take a few days off work, take some pills, have a bit of a lie down and sweat it out, and I’ll be back to work, as right as rain.” But of course, not only does influenza still kill people today in other parts of the world; it can kill people today in this country; if their immune system is depleted or for other reasons. Influenza is a really good example of a microbe that is mutating, so new vaccines will have to be developed. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, some vaccinations are the same as the ones that we were being given 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years
We will need new vaccines. We therefore need to think about the money and investment that we put into developing vaccinations, as well as into maintaining the use of proven ones. The O’Neill review also identified some really clear contexts in which immunisation can reduce AMR, including vaccinating against hospital-acquired infections, and discussed the importance of investment in research for the early stages, when commercial viability may be some years or decades off. The effects of vaccines on AMR are, preventing disease and death; reducing progression and the severity of disease; reducing transmission; and reducing antibiotic use, and therefore the pressure of resistance.

Vaccines work. They save lives, halt the spread of disease, reduce the impact of antimicrobial resistance and prevent rare infections and illnesses. So why do we need a debate at all? Well, we need a debate partly to celebrate the achievement and the impact of vaccination, but also to reiterate the case for it. Sadly, there has been a decline in the use and take-up of vaccinations, with consequent increases in illnesses and infections. The case has to be restated to prompt parents just to check. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, there are parents in countries across the world who are busy for all sorts of reasons. They may get to their third or fourth child, and getting them vaccinated is either not practically easy or it slips their mind. Just check—I am asking all parents out there, with absolutely no judgment whatever, to use this week as an opportunity just to check whether their children are up to date with their vaccinations.

As people who travel to different countries, it also behoves us all to ensure that we are not being complacent when we travel. I know how easy that is. I have relatives in India who I like to visit on a fairly regular basis, and it is important for us adults to make a little note-to-self to check that our vaccinations are up to date.

I will refer briefly to social media because although the Library research paper—I thank the Library researchers and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology for providing briefings for our debates—reassures us that most parents say that the information they have seen about vaccination is supportive; unfortunately, 4% said they had seen anti-vaccination information, most of which had come from the internet or social media. We need to tackle that issue.

This debate has been located in the context of international development, so it would be remiss of me not to say how much I value the work of the Department for International Development, across Governments of different political persuasions and over many years. This Department has a high reputation. Of course, that also goes for right hon. and hon. Members who have served in it over many years, so I thank the Department. By way of triangulation, I recently visited the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle—I declare an interest, as my brother-in-law works there—where I was really impressed not only by the thoughtful way in which the organisation contributes to vaccination across the world, but by the high regard in which it holds DFID, and for good reason.

I would, however, like there to be a greater focus on the spread of information via social media and the internet in our international work, because disease knows no boundaries, poverty knows no boundaries and the internet knows no boundaries. Perhaps there needs to be a tie-up between the work done with social media
companies, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for International Development. Forgive me—that may already be happening, and I applaud officials if it is.

I reiterate that any right hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber who have not read the O’Neill report of 2016 on antimicrobial resistance need to read it. We have talked a lot this week about the climate emergency, and it is definitely an emergency, but so too is AMR. I am going to say this again because it is so shocking: if we stay where we are, by 2050, 10 million people a year will be dead because of antimicrobial resistance.

Alistair Burt: We cannot mention AMR in this House without mentioning Dame Sally Davies, who has done such a fantastic job. If my memory serves me right, she is standing down relatively soon as chief medical officer, but she has made a fantastic contribution, particularly in relation to AMR. She absolutely deserves that we carry on this fight when she moves on to a different role.

Thangam Debbonaire: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I join him in that tribute. I also pay tribute to all the scientists across the world who are helping not only to understand and promote information about AMR, but to help us rethink our relationship with antibiotics. They are also helping us to understand the need to respect antibiotics, but also to respect disease prevention, rather than having a reliance on antibiotics.

Again, I urge all parents to check their children’s records and get them vaccinated if they have not already done so. I also urge all adults to remember to do so themselves when they visit other countries; and I include myself in that. I applaud DFID, the World Health Organisation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and others for the work they do, and particularly the support of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. I urge the Department of Health and Social Care—this is a slight, but brief, sidebar—to accelerate the expansion of the human papilloma virus vaccination to include boys. I know that that is in train, but I would just like it to hurry up, please.

I urge social media companies and internet providers across the world to work with health services and Governments across the world on not only tackling the misuse of the internet for promoting incorrect information but highlighting the value of the internet and social media in promoting good-quality information and messaging. There are social media companies and internet providers who want to be seen as a force for good, and this is a really good way that they could contribute to that. In particular, I would like DCMS to work with the Department of Health and Social Care and with DFID on tackling those harms. This should be a cross-departmental initiative.

I join others in wishing the new Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, well in the mission that he described earlier. He is another Minister, and now a Secretary of State, who is well respected across the House. He brings an enormous amount of knowledge and experience of a range of world contacts to this post, and that can only be a good thing. I would like him to bring that experience to this issue with razor-like precision.

I would really like us to get back to respecting experts. That does not mean doffing the cap, or never arguing or asking questions. It does not mean just saying, “Doctor knows best”—if the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire will forgive me—but saying, “Doctor probably does know best.” In my experience, the hon. Lady generally does know best, and I probably do always say that she is right. I would like us to respect experts because they are experts and, when we ask them questions, to remember that they probably do know quite a lot, but, in return, as she said, for them to listen to us and to remember that our reasonable questions have to be heard if we are going to make progress together. I would like us to respect medical science. I would like us to respect researchers and respect research—and to invest in it. In this country, we do well at that. We are an internationally respected country for knowledge creation. I would like us to continue that tradition and to challenge anybody, anywhere, who says stuff about experts in a way that is not just unhelpful but, in this context, life threatening.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for this debate, because it is a really good example of how a small number of people in the right room at the right time can produce a consensus on something where our country can help to show the world leadership and contribute to saving millions of lives.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The House has had the opportunity during this week to congratulate many hon. Members who took part in the London marathon last week. I do not think there has yet been an opportunity for the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) to be congratulated on her particularly courageous performance and on raising so much money for great causes, so she also has the congratulations of the House.

2.12 pm

Dan Carden: With the leave of the House, I would like to speak briefly in the closing of the debate. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).

This has been a debate of great quality. It is pleasing to know that across the House there is deep concern for the health and wellbeing of children and adults across the world. Care and compassion must never stop at our own country’s borders. I have enjoyed the contributions of all Members who have spoken today—the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), and my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Bristol West.

In many places around the world, parents walk for many miles simply to get to a clinic and a vaccine that they know could save their child’s life. Yet the same cannot be said in all parts of the world. Many barriers still exist in getting people the healthcare they need. No matter how much money we give or how many vaccines are developed, immunisation will not succeed, in the UK or overseas, unless people trust that clinics, hospitals, medication and vaccines are safe; and unless they know that the care they receive is available free of charge. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the alarming outbreak of Ebola continues to spread. It is a tragedy that many communities simply do not trust that the new Ebola vaccine is safe. Despite efforts to develop a new
vaccine for this horrific virus, around one in 10 people who are offered the vaccine are not taking it up. So we need system-wide solutions that tackle the root causes of ill health as the only way to bring about sustainable improvements to people’s lives. Clearly, we need to build trust between communities and health services. Too often in developing countries, the clinic is thought of as the place we go to die rather than recover. If we want global coverage of immunisations for all, then we must do far more to support countries to invest in public, free health services.

I agree with Ministers on their goals for immunisation, but my party disagrees with the Government, in some ways, on how we should support health systems overseas. This Government send Ministers to developing countries to talk up public-private partnerships. They encourage Governments to open up their health systems to British businesses. Labour Members want the UK’s international development work to be focused on supporting publicly owned, publicly run services that everyone can access, and an end to promoting private finance initiative schemes overseas. The next Labour Government will increase the aid spend on health and education and set up a new dedicated public services unit within DFID to help countries to invest in their public services and get them working for everyone. We want a fairer international patent regime that helps people to access medicines, not pharmaceutical companies to hoard profits. Only with a system-wide approach like this will we achieve the goal of immunisations for all.

2.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): It is great pleasure and honour for me to be able to respond to this incredibly important debate in World Immunisation Week. It has been exceptional to see the quality rather than the quantity of the contributions that we have had. We started with my new boss, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who leapt into action on his first day in the job to come to the Dispatch Box and speak without notes, giving a sweeping review of not only the history of vaccination but DFID’s important work in it as of today. I think that Members across the House have been able to be reassured by his passion and commitment to this incredibly important work.

I was also pleased to hear contributions from a range of other Members. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) spoke very movingly about the lessons he learned from his own grandfather. The stories that we heard throughout the debate of the personal experiences that we have had ourselves or in our families really stood out, because we have been part of a generation—an era—that has made a dramatic difference in this area. We have all pledged ourselves this afternoon to continue to be part of that difference.

The hon. Gentleman asked about replenishment, as did a number of other Members. We are in a period from 2016 to 2020 when we are contributing £1.44 billion to this important work, delivered primarily through Gavi. As a Government, we are very much looking forward to being able to host the Gavi replenishment in 2020. I can announce today that we will of course continue to be a leading contributor to the Gavi replenishment. Obviously, we will hold our horses in terms of announcing to the House exactly how much we will be contributing to that replenishment in due course.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of other important points, including the issue of vaccine hesitancy. We must, as we did this afternoon, send a united message on behalf of all here in the UK against that taking hold here in the UK, but also on how important it is to work on this around the world. We heard a range of contributions about social media, in terms of fake news, being part of the medium for these unhelpful messages. That is clearly an online harm. I would encourage all hon. Members to engage with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on the online harms consultation.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the important issue of middle-income countries. Of course, DFID’s work prioritises the poorest countries. To reach the sustainable development goals, it is important that we contribute overseas development assistance, and we are proud that the UK is the first country to put into statute the 0.7% contribution. But we must also—this is where there is an element of political difference between the hon. Gentleman and me—cull in the extra $2.5 trillion that is needed every year to reach those goals. That will necessarily come from outside the public sector. Members have raised the importance of pharmaceutical companies in this research and the role of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I need hardly say that if it were not for a successful capitalist system, they would not have been able to donate that money to their foundation.

Dr Whitford: At the moment, the transition begins when a country reaches a certain level of gross national income, which is a relatively crude measure. We are seeing a greater number of unvaccinated children, often in middle-income countries, and multiple countries requiring post-transition support. Obviously, Gavi is rethinking that strategy, and I ask the Government to encourage it to look at something a bit more multifactorial than a number on a piece of paper.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is right to emphasise that point. We all hope that low-income countries will become middle-income countries and graduate from being supported by Gavi. In 2015 and 2016, for which we have the most recent data, countries that graduated from the Gavi programme maintained the levels of vaccination, but this needs to inform the next period in terms of replenishment, because we cannot afford to lose the community benefit of the level of vaccination.

I was deeply moved by the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who I enjoyed having as a colleague for so many months, and I pay tribute to the work he did to champion this cause. I hope his father is still watching television—hello, Mr Burt.

Alistair Burt: Dr Burt.

Harriett Baldwin: Dr Burt. His father can be really proud of what his son, having survived those vicious injections as a child, has gone on to deliver, in terms of saving the lives of so many millions—literally, millions—of children around the world with his work.

My right hon. Friend paid tribute to the work of Rotarians. I know that all Members will have come across Rotarians in their constituencies who have been
steadfast in raising money to eradicate polio. We are truly on the cusp of doing that. He also mentioned the dangers that health workers face in delivering vaccines. He rightly paid tribute to the Pakistani health workers and police who were killed in terrible attacks in the last month. I think daily of the bravery of health workers who are going into eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo to deliver for the first time in human history the experimental vaccine developed for Ebola. He mentioned the tragic loss of Dr Mouzoko in a conflict zone, with the community resistance to the process of vaccination that has been with us for centuries.

My right hon. Friend made a range of other important points. He talked powerfully about the impact that measles can have and of the three challenges concerning messaging via religious leaders, countering conspiracy theories and countering anti-vax messaging on social media.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) for the expertise she brings to her chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations, with her many years of experience as a doctor. I know that she continues to be active in this field. She gave a sweeping review of the contributions to the development of vaccines throughout history, and particularly in the UK. She rightly mentioned the promise of the malaria vaccine trials. Scientists continue to come up with new and better ways to deal with more and more frequent diseases, including the neglected tropical diseases, and we continue to support that through the Department for International Development.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) drew attention to the sheer millions of children who have been protected thanks to this vaccination programme. We can estimate how many millions of lives have been saved as a result. He rightly called for us to continue that work through the replenishment of Gavi.

I salute the achievement of the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) in running the marathon on Sunday. She made a very good speech. It is never easy, as the last speaker in a debate, to bring in new points, but she did. She drew attention to the brilliant O’Neill review of antimicrobial resistance in 2016, and I noted her family interest in the work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

We heard a number of themes in the debate. The first was that disease knows no boundaries. The Department for International Development is responding to the debate because this ties our world together. We need to work as a world to tackle this challenge and ensure that every child has access to vaccinations. Another theme was the expertise of the Department for International Development in this area—

Alistair Burt rose—

Harriett Baldwin: I give way to one of those experts.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for saying so. The expertise in the Department has been much commented upon, and we are fortunate to have it there and across the Government. We are working increasingly with the Department of Health and Social Care, and there is a new committee, which I hope my hon. Friend will follow, to enhance our work. Ensuring that the research base remains strong and is reflected in Departments’ work is important, as is acknowledging that it is my hon. Friend’s birthday. We appreciate her spending her time with us and enlightening us. Despite all the other things we have to think about, the importance of this topic is central, and today’s debate shows that this House can work together on important things, as indeed it must.

Harriett Baldwin: That is very kind, and I am grateful for those good wishes.

I want to conclude with the following observations. We are talking about a public good—perhaps in no other area of human endeavour is there more of a public good—and it is right that we strengthen the public response and public health systems with regard to this work. Every £1 we spend in this area leads to a £16 benefit, in terms of lives saved, time saved and people’s ability to continue to contribute to society. It is remarkably good value for money. As well as strengthening public health systems, we must strengthen our worldwide economy, and that needs to happen through a combination of public services and a successful and thriving private sector. We need both if we are to deliver on this global challenge. I would like to recognise and thank everyone who has taken part in this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered World Immunisation Week.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered.

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 8 May, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, for three hours and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Andrea Leadsom.)
New Town in Essex

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Sir David Amess.

2.29 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am particularly fortunate that you are in the Chair as I make the case for a new town in Essex, because you are a fellow Essex Member. Given the strains and stresses with the need for housing, I know we share the same ambition that we want to do our bit in Essex. Irrespective of exactly where we want to do this—I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing will come on to this in his brief response—garden towns are a splendid idea, and I know that Epping Forest and Southend West stand united in doing our bit on housing.

My hon. Friend the Minister is probably puzzled by what has triggered all this, but some months ago I was asked to chair a meeting of Essex MPs with leaders and chief executives of their local authorities. There was a pretty broad agenda, but at the heart of it all was the issue of housing. I absolutely applaud what the Government are doing with North Essex Garden Communities and the Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission, which wants a minimum of 1 million homes, which are needed to support economic growth in the Thames estuary, by 2050. That equates to 31,000 per year. There has also been an excellent paper from Policy Exchange, “Tomorrow’s Places: A plan for building a generation of new millennial towns on the edge of London”.

It occurred to me that, as all parliamentarians know, whenever there is a decision to build something in or near their area, there will be a group of people who are not too keen on it. The area that I represent, Southend West, is an oblong alongside the Thames estuary, and there is literally nowhere to build—we cannot build on the parks we have—so I thought it was wrong for me to suggest precisely where in Essex such new building could take place. Then I suddenly thought that I am the first and last Member of Parliament for the constituency of Basildon, which was the largest and most successful new town in the country. In those heady days of 1983, I represented Basildon and Jerry Hayes represented Harlow.

A number of my colleagues wanted to be in the Chamber for the debate, but obviously other things are happening in our country at the moment. In particular, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) wanted to be able to tell my hon. Friend the Minister that Harlow is an extraordinary place of aspiration, opportunity, achievement and community. Many people come to Harlow from the edges of town to make their lives better, to have good-quality housing and to be surrounded by green spaces. Our right hon. Friend believes, rightly, that it is “a place of achievement because we invented fibre optic communications and a renowned sculpture town”—I am beginning to think he, too, is bidding for his town to be a city—“and we will soon be the home of Public Health England making us the public health-science capital of the world. Our new Enterprise Zone and Advanced Manufacturing Centre will provide education, skills and training to our young people so that they can climb the Ladder of Opportunity.”

Our right hon. Friend believes that Harlow has brilliant schools and a wonderful hospital, but any further help the Government can give it as it prospers and develops would be greatly appreciated.

When I say that I am the first and last Member of Parliament for Basildon, it is true. Much has been written and much has been said about the issue, but perhaps I could describe the semantics of who has represented Basildon as the devil at work. I want the House to know that when I was elected in extraordinary circumstances in 1983, I had five local colleagues: Sir Bernard Braine, Sir Edward Gardner, Sir Richard Body, Sir Bob McCrindle and Harvey Proctor. After the 1979 election, the Boundary Commission decided that the new town should stand alone, with the eight wards of Fryerns Central, Fryerns East, Langdon Hills, Lee Chapel North, Nethermayne, Pitsea East, Pitsea West and Vange. I and my family lived in Nethermayne. We had all represented the new town, but as part of a much larger area. When I won the seat in 1983, it was against an extraordinary background, because every single district and county councillor was Labour and the key officers, who were supposed to be impartial, were also Labour. It was me against an army of people trying to do me down, as it seemed at the time.

I want to say to my hon. Friend the Minister, looking at housing in Essex, that my experience of the new town, through the development corporation and the Commission for the New Towns, was absolutely first class. I and the then Member for Harlow had the same chairman, Dame Elizabeth Coker—sadly, she has now died—who was absolutely wonderful, and a brilliant chief executive called Douglas Galloway. As we know, if such projects are going to be successful, they need strong leadership.

Since 1997, the Boundary Commission has intervened again, but the media did not seem to understand that and a few people pretended that the constituency was still Basildon. Well, it was not: as it is now, it is partly Basildon and Billericay and partly South Basildon and East Thurrock, and since then two representatives have always represented the town. It looks, unless the Boundary Commission changes its mind, that I will be the first and last Member of Parliament for Basildon.

Those were 15 glorious years. Our family was raised there—all the children were born at the local hospital—and our children were educated there. We had very happy times, although we did have some unpleasant incidents when, for whatever reason, the opposition attacked my family about the way I educated my children. They did not go to private schools; they just wanted a Catholic education in a single-sex school, but forces went to work against that. In one of the most extraordinary events, at one election—in those days, only four Conservative MPs were anti-fox hunting, of whom I was one—leaflets were distributed by the opposition saying that I was pro-fox hunting, even though somebody from the League Against Cruel Sports was involved. Fortunately, however, my wonderful agent—I think it was the late Barbara Allen—threatened litigation, and a substantial amount of money went to charity. Some very unpleasant things happened, but most of it was really very positive in every sense of the word.
I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that the development corporation and the Commission for the New Towns put in all that infrastructure that was needed. We had the roads, the schools and the industrial sites for businesses. Every single week, I was opening a new factory, a new plant or a new business. Royalty came to Basildon. In fact, although it had nothing at all to do with me, Basildon-mania took hold of the country. We had visits from Sir John Major and Baroness Thatcher. Everyone wanted to visit Basildon and see what was happening with this economic miracle.

I would say to my hon. Friend the Minister that there were certainly two miracles during my time that I was very proud of. The first was St Luke’s Hospice. It started with a penny from Trudy Cox, and the hospice now supports a very wide community. That was a miracle for human beings—it was opened by Princess Diana and the Duchess of Norfolk—and then we had a miracle for animals when we opened the horse, pony and donkey sanctuary. There is an Act of Parliament—I assume it is still there—that I promoted to stop such animals being cruelly tethered.

Wonderful things happen in Basildon. When I started, we had one police station, and by the time I left in 1997, we had three. Not one person was murdered in the 15 years that I was there. There were no school closures: we stopped them happening. There was a crazy suggestion that the A&E should close and move to Orsett, as should the maternity unit, but we stopped it. In those days, one could stop things more easily than today—a silver birch forest was to be razed to the ground, but we stopped that from happening. Sadly, after 1997, there were school closures, the hospital went into special measures after a time, and the silver birch forest was razed to the ground. It was very unfortunate indeed.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and I were invited to attend the 70th anniversary of the founding of Basildon. It was not exactly a trip down memory lane—many of the people I knew had gone or moved on—but he and I sat there and listened to what was said. It was not quite as we remembered, but my hon. Friend the Members for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) are doing a splendid job in jointly representing the town.

I come now to the crux of my speech. We all accept that we need more housing. When I got off at Fenchurch Street and went to Tower Hill, I saw people sleeping on the pavements. That is not acceptable. I remember when Mother Teresa came to the House. When she met Baroness Thatcher, she said, “What are these people doing?” It has always happened, and of course many of them have mental health problems and it is a real struggle to house them, but there is a housing shortage. The Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission has estimated that a minimum of 1 million new homes will be needed by 2050 to match population rises and to support economic growth throughout the region. As I have said, that is the equivalent of 31,000 homes a year, which is certainly an ambitious target.

At one time in Basildon we had 40,000 homes in public ownership, which is a huge number. Under the right to buy, which I supported, many were sold, but it was found that 10,000 were affected by clay heave and no one could get insurance for those properties, so we persuaded the then Housing Minister, now Lord Patten, to repurchase 10,000 properties. One can imagine what that meant for local residents.

Every builder had a go at designing an estate in Basildon. One estate was known as “Alcatraz”—they were not all totally successful—but by and large people valued the home they had been given. It was the east end displaced. That is where I come from. Many of my relatives moved there from London, and some still live there. They were thrilled to get their first house. Some might say, “Oh, but they weren’t very attractive,” and all the rest of it, but people had a home, a place to educate their children, a shopping centre and good transport. As far as I am concerned, the new towns were very successful.

If new towns are delivered in the right way, they not only offer affordable homes to many, but become new communities that people want to be part of. They create jobs, infrastructure links and new opportunities. When planned holistically, a new town can address our housing crisis while protecting existing communities from sprawl and the overbearing impact on local services and infrastructure.

It cannot be beyond our wit today to replicate those successes in another part of Essex. I have been here so long that it is an awful long time since I have heard anything original said: people talk enthusiastically, but it has all been said and done before—it is just reinventing the wheel and coming full circle. We do not need terribly clever people to tell us we already have two success stories in Harlow and Basildon. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister, however, that while we do not have space in Southend West, there is space in other parts of Essex.

Essex is a wonderful county. Some people say that Kent is God’s own county, but I happen to think that Essex is God’s own county. It is vibrant and extremely well led, and it is entirely understandable that people would want to move there. I know that the Minister is going to tell me about three projects he has in hand, but, whatever the political situation at the moment, the Government should grasp the nettle and do it. Let us build on the successes we already have. One could not find anyone more enthusiastic than me. I am, the first and last MP for Basildon, for a new town in Essex.

2.45 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on securing this important debate on new towns in Essex. He is a particularly effective campaigner for his constituency and very persuasive and passionate in championing those he represents. We are fortunate also to have you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you are also an exemplary representative for that particularly beautiful part of the world, blessed or otherwise from the heavens—in my view, the whole country is so blessed.

As my hon. Friend and many others have highlighted in the House, we have not built enough homes over the last few decades, and we certainly do not build them quickly enough. It is our intention to fix that. As he rightly highlighted, there is much we can learn from the post-war new town programme about the importance of place-making, jobs and skills, infrastructure and the need for the long-term stewardship of place. The design of many of those new towns is often criticised—as he
said, it was hit and miss—but it was largely successful, though challenges arose from the rapid development and centralised planning that underpinned them.

New towns were also hugely successful in providing homes and thriving communities for lots of people. Over 2.5 million people now live in a new town, including in lovely Basildon and Harlow. As my hon. Friend recommended, we want to learn those lessons from the past but apply them in a modern context. That is why we believe well-planned, well-designed and locally led garden communities should play a vital role in helping to meet this country’s housing need well into the future by providing a stable pipeline of homes.

This is not just about getting the numbers up; it is about building places that people are happy to call home and that have the potential to become vibrant, thriving communities where people can live and work for generations to come, as my hon. Friend pointed out. We are currently supporting 23 locally led garden communities across the country, from Cornwall to Cumbria, including North Essex Garden Communities, an ambitious proposal for three communities across north Essex with the potential to deliver up to 43,000 new homes.

In March, we announced a further five garden towns, including one in Essex. They include Easton Park garden community, North Uttlesford garden community and West of Braintree garden community. It is an opportunity to deliver up to 18,500 homes. We will make further announcements on more successful places in due course. Each place in the current programme is unique, but the expectations on quality and innovation are high. The council-owned Graven Hill site in Bicester garden town is providing the biggest opportunity for self and custom built homes in the country. Didcot garden town is promoting the innovative use of technology and partnership working between the public and private sector, to underpin a quality agenda.

Garden towns and villages are a key part of the solution to our housing crisis, and we want them to have every lever at their disposal. Last summer, building on the success of post-war new towns, we passed regulations that enabled the establishment of new town development corporations, to be overseen not by the Secretary of State as was previously the case, but by the local authorities that cover the area designated for the new town. Where there are complex delivery and co-ordination challenges, we consider that new town development corporations may be the right vehicle for driving forward high-quality new communities at scale. With a statutory objective to secure the laying out and development of the new town, and with their own suite of powers, those corporations should have the focus and heft to get things done.

Our Housing White Paper “Fixing our broken housing market” was published in February 2017 and committed the Government to allowing locally led new town development corporations to be set up. Section 16 of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 enabled that to happen, and regulations passed in July last year brought those new powers into force—that was one of my first acts as Housing Minister. Some functions, such as the confirmation of compulsory purchase orders, remain with the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of State will continue to lay any regulations that designate new towns, or that establish and dissolve new town development corporations. Those regulations do not change the powers of new town development corporations; they simply localise their oversight.

The regulations provide the mechanism to set up a locally led new town development corporation, but they do not enable the Government to do so simply at the behest of a local authority or group of local authorities. If—as we hope and expect—local authorities consider that a locally led new town development corporation is the right vehicle, we will need to undertake a public consultation. Only if we consider that designating a particular new town would be expedient and in the national interest will we lay the relevant statutory instrument. Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise each proposal for the designation of a new town, and a statutory instrument designating a new town must be debated in both Houses.

I emphasise that locally led new towns must be just that—locally led—and it will be for those local authorities interested in setting up such a body to make the case to the Government for why that would be expedient and in the national interest. That is a complicated way of saying that local and national bodies need to work together to produce the sort of communities that my hon. Friend refers to. We firmly believe that the success of those communities in future will be founded on local acceptability and control.

My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of delivering not just homes but the infrastructure to support them, and we wholeheartedly agree. That is why we have more than doubled the housing infrastructure fund, dedicating an additional £2.7 billion of funding, and bringing the total fund to £5.5 billion. We have given final approval to 94 marginal viability funding projects that will help to unlock a potential 104,000 new homes, bringing forward a pipeline of homes at pace and scale, and helping to solve the problems facing local communities today. That includes more than £11 million of funding to unlock up to 1,500 homes in Colchester and Chelmsford—not far from the area represented by my hon. Friend.

Following expressions of interest to the forward funding stream of the housing infrastructure fund, we have worked with Essex County Council to develop its bids. We have so far announced seven successful forward funding projects, totalling £1.2 billion of grant funding for infrastructure that will unlock up to 68,000 homes across the country.

As my hon. Friend said, housing and infrastructure are only part of the puzzle, and nowhere is that truer than in the Thames estuary, which encompasses the area from lovely Southend to Canary Wharf, as well as north Kent. Comparable in scale to the midlands engine, the northern powerhouse and Oxford-Cambridge arc, the Thames estuary has tremendous potential to power growth for the benefit of local communities, including those represented by my hon. Friend in Southend, and throughout our country.

In the autumn Budget 2016, we asked the Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission to come up with an ambitious vision and delivery plan for north Kent, south Essex and east London. In June last year, the commission, which was led originally by Lord Heseltine and concluded by Sir John Armitt, announced its vision for the estuary. In March this year, the Secretary of
State welcomed the commission's vision and backed its ambitious plans to create 1.3 million new jobs and generate an extra £190 billion for the local economy.

In the context of achieving that economic growth, we want more homes in the estuary, and the Government have announced further commitments to support the delivery of the commission's vision for inclusive and well-balanced growth. Those commitments include £1 million to support a new Thames estuary growth board; launching a strategic communications campaign to promote the estuary as a great place to live, work and do business; funding for the creation of masterplans and feasibility studies on key sites in the estuary’s creative production corridor; exploring the potential for two locally led development corporations; and bringing together relevant authorities to collaborate on the Thames Estuary 2100 plan, to ensure that growth is sustainable and resilient.

Moreover, a Cabinet-level ministerial champion will be appointed to act as an advocate and critical friend for the region within the Government—it is not as if the area needs any additional advocacy, but this will be at ministerial level. Our response marks this Government’s commitment to the estuary, and we have a long-standing commitment to local growth in that area of the country. Indeed, the Government have invested a total of £590 million through growth deal funding since 2014 in the South East local enterprise partnership, which covers the constituency of Southend West. Some £22 million has been spent on 29 skills capital projects, designed to equip the resident workforce with the right skills to meet emerging employment opportunities. By 2021, that investment will deliver 15,000 additional qualifications and over 7,300 apprenticeship places.

In fact, within or close to the Southend West area, the South East local enterprise partnership’s investments include funding to develop the Southend and Rochford Growth Hub; help to develop the area around the Victoria Avenue gateway to Southend; and a package of transport projects comprising capacity enhancements to the A127, as well as a Thames Gateway South Essex local sustainable transport programme—snappily named. They also cover £6.4 million to improve broadband infrastructure in Essex, and a Southend and Rochford joint area action plan towards a new business park adjacent to Southend Airport.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the tireless work, on top of all that activity and investment, that my hon. Friend is doing on his long-standing campaign to turn Southend into a city, a campaign of legendary status now in this House. Although we are debating new towns, we should reflect that the Government are very much committed to supporting existing towns across England to harness their unique strengths to grow and prosper. That is why we have established a stronger towns fund, from which £37 million will be going to the south-east area. The funding will enable town deals across England, and the money will be used to deliver locally led projects creating new jobs, providing further training and boosting local growth.

In conclusion, we have covered a lot of ground in this short debate. I once again thank my hon. Friend for giving us the opportunity to do so, and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for supervising a debate about the area you represent so royally. We want to ensure that everybody who wants a home of their own can have access to one at a reasonable price in a place they want to live. Well planned, well designed, locally led garden communities have a crucial role in helping us to fix our broken housing market by providing the long-term pipeline of homes this country badly needs. But this must be about more than just numbers. We need to learn the lessons from the past—as my hon. Friend quite rightly pointed out—and make sure that we build places that people are happy to call home; places that can support vibrant, thriving communities where people can live and work for generations to come, and that may in the future be candidates to be conservation areas, as I hope Basildon will, in time, become.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. What an excellent short debate.

Question put and agreed to.

2.57 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 7 May 2019

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Sussex our warmest congratulations on the birth of their son.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Patient Registration: GP Surgeries

1. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that patients with no (a) fixed address and (b) proof of identity can register at GP surgeries.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—health tourism is a major cost to the taxpayer, so it is important that we establish that people are entitled to care. However, it is important to ensure that people without proof of ID and of residence are still entitled to healthcare. Where someone is not entitled to it, we will, of course, pursue them for payment.

2. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What funding his Department plans to allocate to radiotherapy services in the next five years.

Radiotherapy Services

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Our radiotherapy modernisation programme has so far delivered 80 upgrades or replacements, with more to come.

Grahame Morris: One in four people currently receive radiotherapy—a number that will increase if the Government achieve their early diagnosis targets. Ministers dispute that 20,000 people in England annually miss out on appropriate access to life-saving radiotherapy. What is the Secretary of State’s estimate? Will he commit to meeting representatives of the Radiotherapy4Life campaign to discuss how we can improve radiotherapy provision in England?

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely happy to meet the group. According to the latest figures, about four in 10 of all cancer patients are treated with radiotherapy; it is a critical treatment to tackle cancer. As I say, there has been an investment programme to replace and upgrade radiotherapy equipment, with 80 upgrades or replacements over the past three years, but there is clearly more to do to make sure that people with cancer get the best possible treatment.

24. Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): May I welcome the NHS long-term plan commitment to complete the £130 million upgrade of radiotherapy machines throughout England? I ask my right hon. Friend to confirm that more effective radiotherapy will mean patients experiencing fewer side effects and having shorter treatment.

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is exactly right. That is why we have put in place the new LINACs—linear accelerators, the equipment that is being rolled out across the country in a £130 million programme. We are always looking at what more we can do to help people to beat cancer.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the Secretary of State agree to look personally at the case for a new satellite radiotherapy unit at Westmorland General Hospital, tied to the Rosemere unit in Preston? I had the privilege last week of driving my constituent Kate Baron to her treatment at Royal Preston Hospital. Wonderful treatment though it is, it is a three-hour round trip that she has had to take on 15 separate occasions—I went with her only the once. Hundreds of people in the south Lakes have to make debilitating, lengthy round trips to get treatment day after day, which is damaging to their long-term health and to their ability to access radiotherapy at all.
Matt Hancock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He did not raise the individual case with me in advance, but I can see the point he is making. The public health Minister, who is responsible for cancer policy, will be very happy to meet him.

NHS Workforce Vacancies

3. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of workforce vacancies throughout the NHS.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The NHS employs more staff than at any time in its 70-year history. Posts may be vacant for a variety of reasons, including maternity and career breaks. The latest data shows that as of December 2018 about 80% of nursing vacancies and 85% of medical vacancies are filled by a combination of bank and agency staff.

Lilian Greenwood: Recent data from NHS Digital shows that there are 720 fewer GPs in the east midlands than just two years ago. According to NHS England, each month thousands of people wait more than four weeks for a face-to-face GP appointment in Nottingham. In January, 3,206 people had to wait more than 28 days between making the appointment and seeing their doctor. Ultimately, that is leaving the GPs we do have overwhelmed and overworked. I know myself that it is creating huge pressures on the emergency department at Queen’s Medical Centre. What is the Minister going to do to change that system?

Stephen Hammond: The NHS long-term plan will set out vital strategic frameworks to ensure that the needs for the next 10 years are met. The hon. Lady will know that we are training an extra 5,000 GPs to work in primary care and general practice. If she writes to me about the specifics of the numbers she mentioned in respect of Nottingham, I will be happy to respond.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Those of us who are campaigning to reopen a full obstetric unit at Horton General Hospital know how important the workforce are to safety in our NHS. At an excellent meeting today, Baroness Harding set out some of the things we can do to increase our workforce, one of which was much better leadership and career planning for the staff we are already retaining in the NHS so that they want to stay longer. What is the Department doing about that?

Stephen Hammond: As my hon. Friend has heard, the Secretary of State commissioned Baroness Harding to bring forward the interim workforce plan. One of the workstreams was looking at retention and the staff we currently have. More than 52,000 nurses are in undergraduate training, and it is essential that they stay in the NHS after training. What Baroness Harding outlined today will ensure that that happens.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm today’s Daily Mail report that the NHS plans to recruit thousands of overseas nurses over the next five years? How much of that shortage has been caused by the exodus of EU nationals from the NHS, and how much of it by the Government’s disastrous decision to abolish nursing bursaries?

Stephen Hammond: I will not comment on the specifics of a leak from an outdated version of the plan. The NHS has always recruited nurses internationally and there are no plans to change that. The workforce plan will set out how more nurses, doctors and nursing associates will be recruited and retained inside the NHS.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Many surgeries in my constituency augment the work of GPs with nurse practitioners. Will the Minister join me in praising the work of nurse practitioners and say what more the Government could do to grow their number so that they can continue their excellent work in surgeries around the country?

Stephen Hammond: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Nurse practitioners do an extraordinarily valuable job across the country. The Government are committed to training more nurses and more nursing practitioners. As I said in an earlier answer, that will be set out in the workforce plan.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): The workforce shortfall is not evenly distributed across the NHS either geographically or by specialty. The Minister will know that there are particularly serious nursing shortages in learning disability and community services. He will also know of the implications of shortfalls—for example, for the ambition to deliver 75% of cancer diagnoses at stages 1 and 2. Will he look again at the evidence on mature students and the impact of losing bursaries on that section of the workforce? Will he meet me to discuss that?

Stephen Hammond: The Chair of the Select Committee is right: the vacancies are not evenly spread and are of particular concern in learning difficulties and a number of other areas. Of course we want to ensure that mature students come back to and stay within the health service. That is why a number of incentives are being put in place to encourage, recruit and retain mature students. I would, of course, be happy to meet her to discuss this matter in more depth.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I appreciate the Minister’s comments about the need for retention and morale-boosting in the NHS. Does he agree that constantly going around fabricating threats of closures when no such threats exist, or talking down the NHS—as some politicians do—does not exactly help recruitment and retention either?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is completely right. One would have hoped that all Members on both sides of the House celebrate the fact that the number of nurses and the number of doctors in the NHS are now higher than they have ever been in its 70-year history, and that the Government are backing that up with a commitment to invest £33.9 billion.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Cuts in lifetime and annual pension tax allowances are causing senior doctors to retire earlier and younger consultants to avoid working extra hours, as they can end up paying more in tax than they earn from the extra hours of work. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with
the Chancellor about the fact that these recent changes are driving doctors from the profession and increasing workforce shortages?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady raises a very important matter. The Government recognise the concerns that have been expressed by NHS doctors, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is engaging in numerous conversations with the Chancellor. I am reluctant to give a running commentary on the nature of those internal discussions, but I can say that we hope to resolve the matter soon.

**NHS Mental Health Services (University/College Students)**

4. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the provision of NHS mental health services for university and college students.  

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care met the Secretary of State for Education in February to discuss concerns about mental health and the prevalence of self-harm among young people. “The NHS Long Term Plan” states that we will “extend current service models to create a comprehensive offer for 0-25 year olds”, and I expect to have regular dialogue with our counterparts in the Department for Education to make that a reality.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The all-party parliamentary university group has heard consistent evidence about the rising number of students presenting with mental health problems. We have been told that it has increased sixfold in the last 10 years, from 9,675 to 57,000. That poses huge challenges to what used to be counselling services but are now becoming a mainstream part of health provision, funded by universities. What are the Government going to do about it?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Young people often fall out of care when they leave their home addresses to go to university. To deal with that transition, we extended the service to nought to 25-year-olds through the forward plan rather than cutting it off at adulthood. That will ensure that we can do more to achieve continuity of care.

I pay tribute to the efforts that universities have made. They have seized on the challenge posed by the increasing prevalence of mental health problems, and I will continue my dialogue with them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The students union at Anglia Ruskin University—which is based in Chelmsford as well as in that other “C” place, Cambridge—carried out a big study on student mental health. One of its requests was for students to be able to register with two GPs, one at home and one at university, so that they would not be stuck without a GP in the holidays or in term time. Can we look at that again?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will definitely look at it. As I have said, the transition poses real challenges, because of a process failure rather than any lack of willingness or commitment on anyone’s part. We must ensure that people retain access to services as they move around.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The all-party parliamentary group on psychology, which I chair, heard just last week that young people who have done extremely well with child and adolescent mental health services are being put on waiting lists when they move away from home to colleges and universities, and are having to start again from the beginning. They are falling through the gaps. Will the Minister ensure that that does not happen any more, that there is no longer a postcode lottery, and that people who have done extremely well in getting into university receive all the support they need?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I see that there is a meeting of minds. Not only do I agree with what the hon. Lady has said, but I have met the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) to discuss exactly that issue. There is clearly a systemic weakness in respect of those who move between home and university, and we will continue our dialogue to ensure that it is fixed.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister will be aware of the close and often tragic link between mental illness and suicide, which is now the biggest killer of young people and is at record levels. What specific measures do the Government have to address that issue?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we expect all local communities to have suicide prevention plans, part of which will be that they engage in areas of greatest risk, whether it be regarding place or their populations. Suicide is the biggest killer of young people and I expect local authorities to engage with education providers to make sure that sufficient measures are in place. We are in the process of challenging the plans to make sure they are fit for purpose.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Universities UK has warned that it simply cannot keep expanding to fill the gaps left by inadequate funding for NHS services, after university spending on mental health services rose by almost half in five years. Too often other sectors such as education are left to fill the funding gap this Government have left in mental health, so can the Minister tell me today when her Government will match our pledge to ring-fence funding for mental health?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I have always viewed the ring fence as a ceiling rather than a protection. We have the mental health investment standard and NHS England is challenging clinical commissioning groups that are not spending what we would expect.

This is a systemic weakness. We have treated children up to 18 and then considered them as adults, but the reality is that people do not suddenly achieve majority overnight. We intend through the forward plan to have the children and young people service from nought to 25. That should enable transition and stop people falling off the cliff edge at 18.

**Prescription Drugs**

5. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the availability of prescription drugs.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): Over 2 million prescription items are successfully dispensed in England every day, and we have well-established procedures to deal with medicine supply issues should they occur. We work closely with all those involved in the supply chain to help ensure any risks to patients are minimised when supply issues arise.

Justin Madders: I welcome the Minister to her place. She will know from written questions I have tabled that my constituents have real concerns about the availability of the epilepsy drug Sabril, which has been in short supply. She told me last month that supplies would be resolved by mid-April; she has now told me in a written answer that supplies will be resolved by mid-May. It seems there is a disconnect between what the Minister is saying and what is actually happening on the ground. When can she guarantee that this drug will be widely available again?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue again. We have expressed our great concern to the suppliers about this problem, and we are working alongside them to ensure that, although there is enough Sabril nationally, we get it in the right place at the right time. We will go back to them and express our concern again.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) on her appointment? I am sure the whole House wishes her well in her important work.

Related to the question of prescription drugs is that of vaccinations, where rates have been falling, partly driven by alarming and inaccurate material posted on social media, including Facebook. Will the Minister join me in calling on Facebook to remove material that deters people from vaccinating their children? If it refuses to do so, does she agree that legislation may be needed?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As he will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met Facebook last week.

On the issue of vaccination broadly, in 2017 we met the 95% rate for vaccination. Immunisation for everybody is absolutely crucial, but some children cannot be immunised because they are too young and others because they are immune-suppressed; so everybody who can be immunised should be immunised.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I also welcome the hon. Lady to her place.

Close to 100 commonly prescribed medications are in seriously short supply, including painkillers, antibiotics and antidepressants. Worries about Brexit outcomes have led to the stockpiling of medications, which has undoubtedly exacerbated the problem, but I know from my own experience in community pharmacy that there have been concerns about the supply chain for several years, long before Brexit was ever dreamed of. The Government have, however, consistently turned a blind eye to these problems, which place additional pressures on GPs and pharmacists and are most certainly detrimental to patient care. Can the Minister assure me today that she understands the scale of the problem and outline the steps she is taking to resolve it?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the shadow Minister, my Lancashire neighbour, for her welcome. The Department takes this extremely seriously; we have a whole team working on it. There are about 12,500 prescribed medicines in this country, with only between 50 and 100 being looked at by the medicines supply team at any one time. There is no cause for complacency, though. In January this year, we took further steps to make it mandatory for pharmaceutical companies to report any supply issues to us as soon as possible.

Urgent Care: Kettering

6. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will make provision for (a) a new urgent care hub at Kettering General Hospital and (b) a health and social care pilot in Northamptonshire with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. [910718]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The Government are committed to transforming the NHS estate. I discussed the urgent care hub with my hon. Friend and other colleagues in January, and, as he knows, I enjoyed my visit to Kettering General. He also knows that future levels of capital will be determined at the next spending review, after which our prioritisation process will be determined, to identify the strongest transformation schemes. We welcome initiatives from local leaders to strengthen and better integrate the local health and care landscape in Northamptonshire.

Mr Hollobone: When Kettering’s present A&E was built 25 years ago, it was designed to cope with 45,000 patients a year. It is now coping with 91,000, and it is estimated that in 10 years’ time, 120,000 will use the facility. The whole NHS in Northamptonshire recognises that an urgent care hub at Kettering General Hospital is urgently required. Will the Government get on and fund it?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is a diligent and consistent representative of his constituents on this matter. He will know that I have heard his request and that, as I have said to him before, the spending review will take place later in the year. Priorities will be decided at that stage.

Patient Experience: Digital Technology

7. George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the patient experience through the use of digital technology. [910719]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Providing patients with modern digital services that are safe, effective, convenient and personalised is central to our NHS long-term plan.

George Freeman: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and for the energy that he brings to this brief. Does he agree that digital health not only improves healthcare systems but also provides a platform for place-based and population-based prevention, better diagnosis, patient empowerment, novel mental health
therapies and accelerated access to the innovative treatments that I introduced as a Minister? This is now being pioneered in some parts of the country. Will he meet me and the Birmingham health partners to look at an interesting idea for digital place-based health impact bonds?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about interesting new policy innovations like that. It sounds right up my street. In fact, I met the Mayor of the West Midlands combined authority to discuss this subject only last week. There is a huge amount of enthusiasm and energy in this policy area, which will enable us to improve patients’ lives across Birmingham and, indeed, the whole country.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, because he is a member, the Babylon Health GP at Hand digital service is based in Hammersmith and Fulham. By the end of this year, it will have run up a deficit of about £35 million for my clinical commissioning group. Given that the clinical commissioning group is cutting GP hours and closing an urgent care centre overnight because it is so short of funds, when are we going to be reimbursed for that £35 million?

Matt Hancock: I do not recognise the number that the hon. Gentleman talks about, but we are changing the way in which the GP contract works to ensure that this new technology can be most effectively harnessed to deliver patient need in a way that also works for the NHS. I am slightly surprised that he has not yet got up to say thank you for our announcement on primary care services in his part of London, which we are going to be expanding while stopping the closure of A&E. A little bit of gratitude for that would also go down well.

Autism

8. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve care for people with autism. [910720]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): We are absolutely resolute in our commitment to improving care and support for autistic people, and we will launch a refreshed autism strategy, which will include children, by the end of the year. We have also launched a national call for evidence, to hear what we are doing that works and where we need to do more, and we have already received more than 2,000 responses.

Huw Merriman: I welcome the NHS long-term plan and the steps that will go towards helping autistic people in the healthcare system. Does the Minister agree that we will make a real difference only if we improve the recording of autism in local health and care records? Will she therefore commit to requiring the NHS to record autism diagnoses in each area with the aim of improving autistic people’s health?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. Reasonable adjustments are critical for improving the experiences of health and care for autistic people. That is why the long-term plan commits to a digital flag in patient records, which will ensure that staff know whether a patient has a learning disability or autism. At the same time, we are looking at how we record where a diagnosis of autism has been made.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): In 2017, more than 100 MPs wrote to the then Health Secretary demanding a national target of a three-month waiting time for autism diagnosis because waits were more than four years in some areas. Stockton clinical commissioning group and Stockton Council have reduced waits, but what do current figures show? Will the Government now set a target in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance?

Caroline Dinenage: I am pleased the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue, because he is absolutely right that we need to drive up performance nationally on diagnosis for autistic people. It is only with diagnosis that people can get the support and help they need. We are collecting data for the first time. It will be published later this year for the first time. It will mean that each area can be held to account and given the help and support it needs to drive up those figures.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline the steps that have been taken to push for a UK-wide, ring-fenced uplift to respite care funding for those who suffer from autism, bearing in mind that there is a two-year waiting list in some healthcare trusts for families to access overnight respite care?

Caroline Dinenage: That is a really good point. We all know that access to respite care can be incredibly valuable, both for autistic people and their carers and their loved ones. That is why we are supporting CCGs that want to invest in respite care, and we are looking more carefully at how we can direct funding to these important services.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Eight years after the Government pledged to move autistic people out of in-patient units following the Winterbourne View scandal, there are still 2,260 people in such units, many of whom are subject to restraint, over-medication, seclusion and even neglect. Rather than reviews and warm words, will the Secretary of State now act to change things by matching Labour’s pledge of £350 million of extra funding to move autistic people and people with learning disabilities back into the community where they belong?

Caroline Dinenage: Of the original 2015 cohort that the hon. Lady mentioned, 6,325 people have been discharged and 476 beds have been decommissioned, but the thing is that people are still coming in. The only way we can achieve permanent, long-term cuts is if we invest in community health. That is why the long-term plan commits to an extra £4.5 billion a year for community health. Local providers are expected to use some of that to develop the right specialist services in the community to reduce avoidable admissions.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

9. Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the efficiency of decision making by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. [910721]
The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Wherever possible, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence aims to publish recommendations on new drugs within a few months of licensing and now publishes draft guidance on cancer drugs even before licensing. Many thousands of patients have benefited from rapid access to effective new drugs as a result.

Lyn Brown: The Secretary of State will know that Maryam is now nine months old. We have been waiting nine long weeks for NICE to announce a decision that I am told it has already made. Spinal muscular atrophy babies have been waiting 16 months for the care they need, which is longer than many SMA babies live without treatment. There is another closed-door meeting tomorrow. If NICE finally decides to provide Spinraza on the NHS, how long will it be before Maryam and the other babies get their first dose?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady rightly raises an important case, and I have met her about it and followed it closely. As she says, there is work ongoing and happening this week to try to make progress. NICE is currently developing technical appraisal guidance on the use of the drug Spinraza, to which she refers. We are working to ensure that we can get it right.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on multiple sclerosis, may I urge my right hon. Friend to expedite its perfectly proper processes on the licensing of cannabis-based drugs, particularly for the treatment of multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s and motor neurone disease?

Matt Hancock: Yes. My hon. Friend raises another important area where progress is being made on the ability for people to get access to drugs that could help them. We now have a medicinal cannabis programme in place, as we discussed in this Chamber a couple of weeks ago, so that those with acute conditions and with clinical support for using medicinal cannabis can get it. We are also working as rapidly as we reasonably can to normalise the ability to use medicinal cannabis within the NHS.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Kuvan, Orkambi and Spinraza—these are just three life-changing drugs to which thousands of patients are being denied access on the NHS. Patients have waited far too long for the drugs they desperately need, and for some, as we have heard, it is a matter of life and death. Does the Secretary of State agree that the NICE appraisal process for rare diseases is just not fit for purpose?

Matt Hancock: I do agree it is important that NICE constantly tries to get those decisions made objectively, robustly and as fast as possible. There is cross-party support, and I hope continuing cross-party support, for these judgments being made independently so that they are taken not by Ministers but by clinicians. We can all agree that this has to be done as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Gill Furniss: One in three early intervention in psychosis services in the north of England does not meet the standard that NHS England expects. What is NHS England doing to end this postcode lottery and ensure that my constituents can access the same high-quality mental health services as people in other areas of the country?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend will know that, in addition to the additional £2.3 billion, we are clear that this money will lead to more rapid treatment. NHS England will also be giving a really direct challenge to clinical commissioning groups and trusts to make sure improved services are delivered on the frontline.

Nursing Associates

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the number of nursing associates in the NHS.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Funding allocations to clinical commissioning groups vary to meet the needs of local populations, including mental health needs. These allocations are determined by a formula managed for the NHS by the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation. For mental health, the formula takes into account patient-level data covering community, out-patient and in-patient mental health services, as well as improving access to psychological therapies activity and hospital episode statistics.

Steve Double: The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Health Education England is leading a national nursing associate programme with a commitment for 7,500 nursing associate apprentices to enter training in 2019. It is also working with health and care providers to develop a talent
pipeline of future nursing associates, as well as sharing how providers are deploying currently qualified nursing associates.

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, and I thank the Secretary of State for his welcome announcement last month on “Shaping a Healthier Future” in London, which has gone down very well locally. How many more nurses does the Minister for Health think London will need over the spending review period? What specific measures is he taking to improve London’s offer to would-be nurses?

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct that the Secretary of State’s announcement has gone down extremely well. He will know that there are now more nurses in training than ever before—over 50,000—and he will know that London, in particular, will get its share of those nurses. He should be reassured that we are creating routes into nursing via nurse training, nursing recruitment and, indeed, nursing associates, and their recruitment into valuable roles across the health service will benefit his constituents.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister know that when I went to a restaurant the other night with my wife there was a hum and a buzz coming mainly from the young women there? I asked, “Who are all these young women?” The maître d’ said, “They are all young Spanish nurses who are going home. This is their last evening in Britain.” Nursing associates will not fill that gap; these are young people coming in at the classroom assistant level of qualification. We need more nurses now, and we want to stop this haemorrhaging of nurses who are going back to the rest of Europe.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman will know that nursing and nursing associate training places are being increased; that more funding is going in to increase nurse training places by 25% every year, from last September; and that we are announcing an expansion of nursing associates. He will see tomorrow, when new figures are announced, that more nurses are working in the NHS than this time last year.

Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma Awareness

13. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on recognising 17 May as diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma awareness day.

Patricia Gibson: As the Minister will be aware, having DIPG awareness day on 17 May is very important in raising the awareness of this fatal illness, which is often overlooked and where the prognosis has not improved in the past 40 years, despite 40 children in the UK dying from it each year. How will the people suffering from DIPG benefit directly from the funding that she has outlined? Does she commit to keeping the House updated on measures to combat this serious illness?

Seema Kennedy: Let me begin by paying tribute to my constituent Paula Holmes, who made me aware of DIPG, and to all the work she has done in memory of her daughter Katy, one of the 40 children who died from it. We rely on researchers to submit high-quality research proposals in this difficult area, and the National Institute for Health Research has put out a highlight notice asking for research teams. We stand ready to translate any new discoveries as quickly as possible into new treatments and diagnostics for patients, and I am happy to keep the House updated.

Flour Fortification: Folic Acid

14. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What his policy is on the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. [910727]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): We have announced our intention to consult on the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. We are fully committed to this and we will be launching the consultation as soon as possible.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but the Government said in January that the consultation would happen soon. As it was originally announced in October, people are becoming frustrated. Can she say that this will happen before the summer? Can she confirm that it will be about how we go about mandatory fortification, rather than about whether we should do it?

Seema Kennedy: I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration, and I know that Members have been waiting for this. I am reassured by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that this will happen. I am going to be making it happen before the summer, and I will return to the House to update it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): The Healthy Start scheme, which provides food vouchers and coupons for free vitamins, reaches only about a third of children living in poverty. It is also woefully out of date; it is worth only £3.10 and it has not been updated since 2009. What are the Government doing to improve both the scale and impact of this important scheme?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), says that she is looking into it and that we will report back.
Dementia Support

15. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of support for people with dementia.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): We are absolutely committed to making this the best country in the world in which to live with dementia by 2020. Already, more than two thirds of people with dementia receive a diagnosis; there are 2.85 million dementia friends and 346 areas in England are dementia friendly; and the £250 million dementia discovery fund is the largest venture fund in the world aimed at discovering and developing therapies for dementia.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Minister for her reply. I recently met representatives of the Alzheimer’s Society, which is, as the Minister will know, pushing forward with a campaign for more support for those suffering from dementia. Can she assure me that, despite what she has just said, this will be one of the main focuses of her Department during the comprehensive spending review?

Caroline Dinenage: We are absolutely committed to ensuring that everybody, including those who live with dementia, has access to the care and support that they need. We have noted the very important contributions of the Alzheimer’s Society and of a number of other reports. We are considering a number of different funding options and are keen to draw on the best practice of what works so that no one ends up spending their life savings on their care.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): My friend and constituent Malcolm Haigh, who is known locally as Mr History because of his forensic knowledge of the history of Batley and Spen, is now living with dementia. We know that social prescribing for dementia sufferers really does work, and I congratulate Kirklees Council on its innovative Community Plus scheme, which uses social prescribing for dementia. What auditing is going on that will look at the community groups that are offering these singing clubs and walking and cycling groups, and how we audit them in order to make the best of social prescribing so that we take the burden off the NHS?

Caroline Dinenage: Mr History sounds fabulous. There will be a new academy of social prescribing, which will look at some of the incredibly valuable work done by communities up and down the country and really be able to draw out some of that best-value analysis.

Mental Health Services

16. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase awareness of rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions in mental health services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Steps to increase awareness of rare conditions in care settings and specialty services, including mental health services, are being taken through the implementation of the UK rare disease strategy. The Department published an update to its implementation plan for achieving the commitments and strategy in England in February this year to coincide with Rare Disease Day.

David Duguid: I thank the Minister for her answer. Specific mental health problems are common symptoms of the genetic and often undiagnosed condition of 22q11.2 deletion syndrome and therefore many people with the condition need access to knowledgeable mental health services, but families often report being unable to get the support that they need. With Mental Health Awareness Week fast approaching, will the Minister meet me to discuss increasing awareness of 22q11.2 among NHS mental health practitioners and ensure that people with the syndrome can access the services that they need in all parts of the United Kingdom?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course I will be happy to meet him. He is right to identify the fact that people with long-term conditions are more likely to suffer from mental ill health. It is very important that we achieve good care co-ordination so that all those issues can be tackled in the round. We will continue to work to ensure that professionals are made aware of these conditions.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I have spent much of the past week supporting the parents of a child who has a very, very rare genetic condition and who now needs the support of child and adolescent mental health services. It has become very clear to me that CAMHS is set up only to deal with mainstream children who can go through perhaps its anxiety counselling courses and who can process information in a certain way. It does not seem at all geared up to help children who have very complex needs and perhaps learning disabilities. What can we do to make sure that those children who are more vulnerable are not left behind?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is entirely right. I am particularly concerned about the impact on young people going through a period of mental ill health who have neurodiverse conditions and other conditions. It is very important that we tackle the entirety of the individual’s need. Clearly, we need to do more to make sure that all children with whatever conditions can access help when they need it.

Mr Speaker: My ambition is to reach Question 17 so that the House, Mid Sussex, the nation, the European continent and the world can hear the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames).

Best Practice

17. Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What progress he is making on the dissemination of best practice throughout the NHS.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Mr Speaker, I share your ambition in reaching Question 17 to be able to say that the long-term plan for the NHS sets out ambitious goals to embed a culture of quality improvement of which my right hon. Friend would be proud.
Sir Nicholas Soames: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for getting this far down the list of questions. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has a serious ambition to try to drive this plan forward, but it is unacceptable that best practice is not better disseminated throughout the NHS. It is completely unacceptable that there are such wide divergences in standards between hospitals, and it requires the everyday attention of the Secretary of State himself to drive this change through.

Matt Hancock: I agree entirely and enthusiastically with my right hon. Friend. The need to improve services in the NHS just to bring them up to the best that is in the NHS is vital and urgent. We can lift the quality of care that all our constituents get simply by learning from the best. We have schemes such as the “getting it right first time” programme, which is brilliant at teaching hospitals how to do things the way the best hospitals do them, and we want to see more.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): A recent report in the British Journal of Surgery demonstrates that the introduction of the Scottish patient safety programme resulted in a 36% drop in post-surgical deaths. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating all the surgeons, anaesthetists, theatre teams and ward staff who achieved this, and would he like to visit Scotland and see the programme in action?

Matt Hancock: I always love visiting Scotland and would love to come and see this programme in action; I have heard and read about it. In improving quality across the NHS, we need to improve the ability of the NHS to look everywhere—outside the NHS in England, as well as at other hospitals—to find and emulate best practice.

Mr Speaker: This is a general question about best practice in the NHS, into which the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) could legitimately shoehorn his concerns about acupuncture, chiropractic therapies, osteopathy and other non-drug based, non-addictive options for pain management, about which I think he is keen to expatiate.

Mr Speaker: This is a general question about best practice in the NHS, into which the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) could legitimately shoehorn his concerns about acupuncture, chiropractic therapies, osteopathy and other non-drug based, non-addictive options for pain management, about which I think he is keen to expatiate.

19. [910732] David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am clearly in your good books and I am most grateful. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explain why so little use is made of these three therapies in the health service, and why NICE has not made any attempt to look at hospitals in China, 50,000 of which use acupuncture for lower back pain?

Matt Hancock: Mr Speaker, I am glad that you have used your considerable flexibilities to bring this question in, because I wanted to say that NICE is in the process of developing a guideline on the management of chronic pain, which will look at the biological, physiological and social factors, including some treatments mentioned by my hon. Friend. There is progress in this space, and I am glad that we have been able to raise this matter in the House today.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As well as looking at best practice in the NHS, it is vital that we look at best practice in social care. Given that 70,000 people with dementia were admitted to hospital unnecessarily with falls, dehydration and infections just last year, how is the Secretary of State going to put a laser-beam focus on standards in social care?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I am glad that this discussion of improving quality across the NHS and social care has united the House in its enthusiasm to see best practice and ensure that people learn from it. We have seen an awful lot of learning in social care, as most social care is delivered by private sector providers, but there is more to do and there are different levers that we can pull. When social care providers lose their good or outstanding status, they also often lose their contracts, so there is an awful lot of pressure on them to learn from best practice around the country, and I would only emulate that.

Stem Cell Donation

18. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote stem cell donation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Since 2011, the Department has provided more than £26 million to NHS Blood and Transplant and to Anthony Nolan, to improve stem cell donation, and is now establishing a unified UK stem cell registry. I would also highlight the inspirational work of Team Margot, who are working to increase the number of people on that stem cell register by enrolling themselves in the transatlantic rowing race. I urge all hon. Members to support that campaign.

Antoinette Sandbach: I hope the Minister will join me in praising my constituent Peter, who has myeloma and set up the “10,000 donors” register. There are now 22,000 donors registered, but Peter has a rare ethnic mix of English, Irish, Chinese and Portuguese. What more can be done to encourage donors from minority communities?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have spent a lot of time encouraging donors from minority communities, but the real issue with regard to stem cell donation is that it is about genetic composition. We live in a wonderful society where we all have heritage going back in various, very complex ways, but that makes finding a suitable donor for stem cell donation extremely difficult. It is therefore important that we encourage people to take the test to establish their genetic heritage so that we can have more and more diverse people on the register.

Violence Against Women and Girls

20. Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What recent steps Public Health England has taken to help ensure that the violence against women and girls service commissioning guidelines are implemented throughout the NHS.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank my hon. Friend for her important work on the whole issue of violence against women and girls. Clinical commissioning
groups are the primary commissioners of NHS services, and, as such, play the lead role in ensuring that service commissioning guidelines on violence against women and girls are implemented through the NHS, as informed by evidence available and current guidance.

Sarah Newton: Public Health England is planning to update the public health outcomes framework this summer, but there are no planned outcome measures for victims of domestic abuse or sexual violence. Will my hon. Friend liaise with the Home Office and the clinical commissioning groups to consider measures so that we can all be confident that victims are getting timely access to appropriate services?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is knocking on an open door, because this issue is very close to my heart. The public outcomes framework does include a measure of reported domestic abuse incidents and crimes that is intended to give an indication of the scale of the issue in each area, and we expect CCGs to commission services as a response to exactly those issues. I have written to CCGs to remind them to commission appropriate sexual violence services, as well as those already commissioned by NHS England so that we have proper support for people who have been victims of these terrible offences.

Topical Questions

T1. [910738] Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): It is the goal of the Department to support everyone to live longer, healthier lives. I will be working right across the health and social care sector to deliver the goal of five years of extra healthy life for people in the UK. In doing that, I am delighted that we will now have on the ministerial team the enthusiasm and assistance of the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy).

Mr Robertson: In achieving those goals, the Secretary of State will be concerned that while many patients can obtain GP appointments for emergency cases on the same day, quite a lot of people have to wait three or four weeks for non-emergency appointments. Can the Government do anything to improve that situation?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I entirely understand my hon. Friend’s concerns. We are acting to make sure that there is better access. We have a review of access to primary care. But, more than that, the biggest increase of the £39.9 billion of extra taxpayers’ money that we are putting into the NHS is in GP access, primary care and community care to make sure that we get ahead of the curve and help people to stay healthy rather than just treat them in hospital.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Secretary of State explain why 200,000 nurses have left the NHS since 2010 and why today we are short of 40,000 nurses?

Matt Hancock: The good news is that we have record numbers of nurses in the NHS. We have more staff in the NHS than at any time in its history. While of course in any very large organisation like the NHS there is always turnover, what matters is having the people we need. We are putting more money in, we are going to need more people, and we are developing a plan to make that happen.

Jonathan Ashworth: We have about 90 nurses a day leaving the NHS, so rather than posing for the newspapers by the stables like a character from a Jilly Cooper novel, why does the Secretary of State not show some actual leadership and reverse the cuts to development, reverse the cuts to training places and reverse the abolition of the training bursary so that we can start to recruit the nurses and midwives our NHS needs today?

Matt Hancock: What I will not reverse is the increase in the number of people who are helping to improve lives and save lives in our NHS. It is only because of the extra money that we in this Conservative Government have put into the NHS that we can be confident that we are securing its future to deliver better care for every single person whom we represent in this House.

T5. [910742] Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Patient-GP ratios across the Witham constituency are under pressure and in the highest in the country. Will my right hon. Friend use the forthcoming comprehensive spending review to secure more investment in not only GPs but Witham health services?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is right to raise that. That money is already committed. Of the extra £33.9 billion that is going into the NHS, the biggest increase is going into community and primary care, because I understand how important it is for people to get decent access to their GP services in Witham and across England.

T2. [910739] Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The council chair of the British Medical Association recently said: “The only thing that is certain, is how disastrous leaving the EU will be for the NHS... no type of Brexit can ever offer the same benefits we currently have.” Does the Secretary of State agree with that sentiment, or can he tell the House how he thinks Brexit will improve the NHS?

Matt Hancock: No, the NHS is going to be there for us no matter what the outcome of Brexit is. The British people voted for Brexit, and we are going to deliver Brexit, and then we are going to get on to doing all the other things. Even over the last few months, we have been able to put extra money into the NHS to ensure that its future is guaranteed.

T6. [910743] Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I was pleased when the Department of Health and Social Care accepted that changes to our pensions legislation are driving early retirement and reduced hours among senior consultants. Can the Minister give an update on what discussions are being had with the Treasury to attempt to find a solution to that issue?
The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): My hon. Friend will have heard me say in answer to the earlier question that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Chancellor are in discussions about that matter. It would be unfair of me to comment on the progress of those discussions, but we hope to resolve them soon.

T3. [910740] Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Maternity Action reports that migrant women requiring maternity care from NHS hospitals are being deterred from receiving treatment by charges and fear of immigration sanctions. Will the Secretary of State meet me and campaigners to discuss what we can do to address that worrying situation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The issue that the hon. Lady raises is very concerning. I would be more than happy to meet her to look at that.

T9. [910746] Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Some 1,486 of my constituents have been diagnosed as suffering from dementia. The Alzheimer’s Society is urging that, to provide the best support and care, carers should have tier 2 training. Is the Minister doing everything possible to achieve that?

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Yes. By 2020, we expect all relevant staff to have received appropriate dementia training.

T4. [910741] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In the north-east, over half of domiciliary care workers are on zero-hours contracts, 40% have no relevant qualification and, as the recent Low Pay Commission report shows, rates of non-payment of the minimum wage are rising, but enforcement is not. What will the Secretary of State do to improve the pay, conditions and training of careworkers who provide such an essential service?

Caroline Dinenage: This is all about getting more money into the system. That is why we have increased spending on adult social care by 9% over the last three years. We are focusing on attracting more people into adult social care, which is why we had the “Every Day is Different” recruitment campaign, to ensure that we get more brilliant-quality staff into adult social care roles.

T10. [910747] Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that nursing associates are an excellent new role on the frontline of the NHS, delivering hands-on care for patients? If so, what more can be done to get more of them across the country?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That role has been introduced to help build the capacity of the nursing workforce and support nurses and wider multidisciplinary teams. As he will have heard me say earlier, I am delighted that Health Education England is leading the national nursing associate training programme, with a commitment to train 7,500 nursing associates this year.

T8. [910745] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Tens of thousands of children are born every year with brain damage as a result of pre-natal exposure to alcohol, yet most clinical commissioning groups are not providing support for those with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, despite Government guidance telling them to do so. Will the Government take the action needed and provide support for those suffering with this life-limiting and lifelong condition?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman is right. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders are not sufficiently widely understood across the NHS. We must ensure that we give support to those who are affected and also raise awareness, not least to encourage people to understand the risks they are taking when they drink alcohol during pregnancy.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Over many years, High Wycombe has established a dramatic way to help tackle obesity. To that end, a week on Saturday, the mayor, a number of councillors and I will be weighed in public, to check whether we have put weight on at taxpayers’ expense. If the Government wish to extend that programme to other Members of the House, I will be happy to ask to borrow the weighing tripod.

Mr Speaker: The only thing that is weighty about the hon. Gentleman, in my experience as a county colleague, is his brain.

Matt Hancock: I would be delighted to encourage that which my hon. Friend encourages. One thing that leads to people putting on weight is high levels of stress, so perhaps we could put some contentious issues behind us to reduce stress levels and allow all of us to lead healthier and happier lives.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) is experiencing no stress. I rather imagine that she is still celebrating that rocket of a goal last night by Vincent Kompany.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It was a magnificent and very important goal, Mr Speaker.

I would like to put it on record that my husband is an A&E consultant. The Secretary of State will know that one of the massive factors in gaps in rotas is that A&E doctors and other hospital doctors are facing notional tax rates of 90% or more from taking on extra shifts. It is not a very Tory policy, this. What is he doing about it?

Matt Hancock: This policy has come up a couple of times in questions today, and rightly so. I am having discussions with the Chancellor. It is a tax policy, and I do not think that my right hon. Friend would be incredibly enthusiastic about me announcing tax changes at the Dispatch Box. It is something that we are talking about and working on. It is the unintended consequence of tax changes that were designed for other parts of the economy.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The appropriate and safe disposal of drugs and medical equipment has recently been raised with me by my constituents in Corby. Will he keep in mind these concerns when reviewing policy in terms of both awareness of what to do and the ease with which it can be done?
Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. The NHS faced the loss of a contract last year, which was then safely put back into place. The point he makes about guidance is absolutely right, and if he wants to come and talk to me about it, I will be happy to discuss it.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is deeply concerning that in the past 10 years the number of prescriptions for opioid drugs has risen by 9 million. In this time, codeine-related deaths have more than doubled to over 150 a year. While I welcome moves to label opioid medicines, what further measures will the Secretary of State take to protect people from the dangers of opioid addiction?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Lady may know, I am very concerned about this. We are working on what we can do to ensure that opioids are prescribed and used only when they are the most appropriate and right treatment. Opioids save people from significant pain and are used every day right across the NHS, but opioid addiction is a very serious problem. Some other countries have got this wrong, and we must get it right.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for coming to County Hospital in Stafford on Saturday. Does he agree that he saw there the importance of small accident and emergency departments sustaining the whole of the regional health economy by giving support to the larger ones?

Matt Hancock: Yes. It was brilliant to go to County Hospital in Stafford and see the hard work and team work and to be able to thank NHS staff both in Stafford and across the country working over the long weekend. My hon. Friend is a brilliant and diligent voice of Stafford. I do not think that we should be seeing the closure of small A&E units, and I will work with him on the issue.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): As the Minister is aware, I have become concerned about the rising number of suicides in my constituency. When I talk to professionals in the area, they tell me that it is not just funding that is causing some of the problems but the lack of staff. What more can the Minister do to ensure that we have the mental health staff that we desperately need?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that. She is right to do so. We are aware of some of the specific issues in her constituency, and I look forward to visiting and taking up some of the discussions directly.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The Secretary of State has been kind enough to visit Worcestershire Royal Hospital, which serves people in my constituency. He saw for himself how small the emergency department is there. With £20 billion going into the NHS, does he agree that there is a good opportunity to look again at returning services to Redditch—in particular, the maternity and A&E departments, which have been removed?

Matt Hancock: It was brilliant to visit Worcester hospital—another medium-sized hospital, but with a small A&E department that was working incredibly hard given the facilities. I pay tribute to all the work of staff there and very much take on board the points that my hon. Friend has made.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a lot to get through. I shall take one more question, and then we must move on.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Today I met representatives of the Teenage Cancer Trust. As we await the publication of the workforce implementation plan following the publication of the NHS long-term plan, what plans does the Minister have to ensure sustainable funding for the teenage and young adult cancer specialist workforce?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; I had the pleasure of meeting representatives of the Teenage Cancer Trust recently as well. Cancer is an absolute priority for the Government. Our aim is for 75% of all cancers to be detected at an early stage by 2028. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, the workforce plan will be reporting imminently.
Severe Disability Premium

3.40 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State if she will make a statement on support for people formerly receiving severe disability premium who have transferred to universal credit.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Universal credit is the biggest change in the welfare system since it was created. It is a modern, flexible, personalised benefit reflecting the rapidly changing world of work. When designing universal credit, a choice was made not to replicate every aspect of the disability provision in the legacy system.

However, I want to make it very clear that our intention was that no money from this area would be taken out of the system. Universal credit was therefore designed with all the money from the old disability premium recycled to target support on the most severely disabled. Disabled people are some of the biggest beneficiaries of universal credit, with around 1 million disabled households having on average around £100 a month more on universal credit than they would have had on the legacy benefits.

On Friday, the High Court handed down a judgment in relation to universal credit and the severe disability premium. The severe disability premium is an additional premium payable with mean-tested benefits such as employment and support allowance. Universal credit is more targeted, and support is focused on those who need it most. Transitional protection will be available for people who are moved on to universal credit from other benefits, provided their circumstances stay the same.

We are pleased that the court recognises that it is for Ministers to frame the appropriate transitional arrangements for moving claimants on to UC, and we will consider all our options. The Government are committed to delivering a welfare system that supports disabled people.

Margaret Greenwood: On 7 June, the Government pledged that severe disability premium claimants would no longer have to transfer to universal credit until managed migration started. Yet for months afterwards, the claimants were still required to do so—until the Government finally introduced a statutory instrument, which came into force on 16 January.

Severe disability premium does not exist in universal credit, so, in transferring, those claimants lost about £180 a month. Often, that was just because they moved home; their postcode changed, but their needs did not. Yet the Government planned to pay them only £80 a month more on universal credit than they would have had on the legacy benefits.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I welcomed the introduction of the gateway back in January. Will my hon. Friend confirm that this means that existing recipients of severe disability payments will be moved on to universal credit with transitional protections, so that they are fully protected as they move across?

Justin Tomlinson: I pay tribute to the former Minister, who did a huge amount of work in this area to ensure suitable transitional protection for some of the most vulnerable people in the system. It is absolutely the case that those who are part of the managed migration will get full transitional protection.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We welcome the High Court decision and commend the individuals who brought their case for their perseverance. It is absolutely extraordinary that the Department for Work
and Pensions thought it could get away with short-changing claimants who had already been made worse off by being moved on to universal credit. Because of the entirely arbitrary cut-off point where the DWP decided to stop naturally migrating SDP claimants, many thousands will miss out on £1,000 a month. That is completely unacceptable.

The ruling acknowledges what the SNP has been arguing since December: the Tories in Westminster are short-changing claimants who are owed back payments as a result of having their severe disability payments stopped. It is not only appalling that the DWP is short-changing claimants; it is appalling that people will now have to wait for those back payments until managed migration regulations are put through. Even then, it might take months to administrate them. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) has twice written to the Secretary of State asking for her to immediately initiate back payments, so that people do not have to wait.

Will the Minister tell the House why the payment of that money has been pegged to the managed migration regulations? Now that the ruling has allowed him to take stock, will he sort out this issue once and for all, and immediately put together regulations that legislate for the full back payments as a matter of urgency? There are now not one, not two but three ongoing cases where the DWP needed to investigate and initiate back payments of disability benefits on an enormous scale owing to error or to their policies being deemed unlawful. Will he ensure that no cuts to other areas of Government spending are being made to cover the cost of clearing up his Department’s mess? Does he really believe that, after all this, disabled people who require support can have any confidence whatever that the DWP has their best interests at heart?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for the points she raises. To be absolutely clear, those who are part of the managed migration will get the full transitional support. The whole point of the gateway was to provide additional support for those who had changed circumstances that would not have been entitled to the full transitional protection. I absolutely understand the point about the urgency of bringing forward the regulations, but we want to ensure they are done in the correct manner so we do not replicate the errors of the difficult and complex legacy benefit, which we see in our surgeries as individual constituency MPs, whereby some of the most vulnerable people in society are missing out on the benefits to which we all agree they are entitled.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Of course people with disabilities must be properly served by our benefits system; I know the Minister well, so I know that he will be working extraordinarily hard to ensure that that happens in his Department. Is it not a fact that universal credit is targeted far more effectively at ensuring that help is given to those who most need it?

Justin Tomlinson: I know that my hon. Friend works extremely hard in this area; I have made several visits to his constituency, where I have seen him championing local organisations that make a difference to disabled people in his community. Universal credit targets support at those who most need it, which is why, on average, more than a million disabled households will be £100 a month better off.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The severe disability premium does what it says on the tin: it goes to those with the most severe disabilities. Why, then, is the Minister claiming that people who most need support are gaining, when more than 10,000 people entitled to the severe disability premium are now waiting for back payments—like my constituent who is owed nearly £1,000 by the DWP? People are building up rent arrears and are in danger of eviction. Why are the Government not treating them properly by bringing forward this legislation and paying them what they are due?

Justin Tomlinson: We are all keen to bring forward those regulations, but I remind the hon. Lady that where under the legacy benefit an ESA claimant would expect £167.05, the equivalent under universal credit will be more than twice that: £336.20 a month.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Hon. Members of all parties have had experience of the problems that our constituents, particularly our disabled constituents, face with the transfer to universal credit. However, we must not lose sight of the successes. Yesterday, the Grimsby Telegraph carried a report in which Mr Mark Coad said that, following the death of his partner, “I signed up for Universal Credit, and it has been one of the best things that I have ever done, because it not only got me back into work, but provided me with some support mentally, as it forced me to get out of the house and stop wallowing in my grief.” Does the Minister agree that we must focus on the successes and ensure that all cases have an equally successful result?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend raises an important broad point: universal credit offers personalised, tailored, bespoke support, for the first time. If hon. Members visit their local jobcentre and talk to staff, particularly experienced staff, they will hear how for the first time they feel empowered to make a real difference to people’s lives.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does this latest botched attempt not underline that one reason why the Government are having trouble with universal credit is that it was primarily designed as a work-related benefit and that it continually misses out the people who need it most? Will the Government now re-table the managed migration regulations without the hard stop?

Justin Tomlinson: I do not recognise that point. As a Government, we are spending £5 billion more a year on supporting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions through the main disability benefits. We are rightly targeting support at those most in need in society. Through universal credit, that is coupled with a personalised, tailored and bespoke service.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The loss of the severe disability premium continues to cause hardship to people in my constituency and throughout the country. In some cases, it has forced people into rent
arrears and extreme poverty. What are the Minister and the Department doing specifically to support people in those situations?

Justin Tomlinson: Through the universal credit system, for the first time, they will have a named work coach who can help them to navigate not only any individual challenges that they face, but the additional support that they can get. Rightly, we are making sure that the most vulnerable people in society get both the financial support and the time from their named work coach to make sure that they are in their best position.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to cascade the detail of this policy to advice services so that they can best help and support those who come to them seeking help?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Not only do stakeholders and those with real, genuine frontline experience work closely with us and help to shape our policies, but we recognise that they can play a key part on the frontline. I therefore very much welcome the announcement that Citizens Advice will be present across the jobcentre network to provide additional support for claimants above and beyond what our frontline staff do.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We know that approximately 20,000 people died before the Department was able to review their backdated ESA payments. That must not happen with the severe disability premium payments. Has the Department investigated whether it has happened to claimants who were owed such payments? If so, how many? In the event of death, who will receive the back payments?

Justin Tomlinson: The key priority is to make sure that we get money to the most vulnerable in society as quickly as possible. That is why our commitment remains that we will bring forward the regulations at the earliest opportunity.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): In March, I raised with the Minister the case of a constituent with a severe brain injury who applied for universal credit in August 2018 and immediately lost his severe disability premium. The Minister requested that I write to him. As yet, I have received no response. My constituent has now been without his severe disability premium for almost nine months. This vulnerable individual needs action. Will the Minister get a grip on this?

Justin Tomlinson: I apologise to the hon. Lady that I have not seen the letter yet. I will make sure that I do as a matter of urgency and will respond personally.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My constituent suffered severe trauma and mental illness. When he filled in his form four years ago, some mistakes were made, but those mistakes could and should have been picked up. However, he has had to wait years for money he was owed in back payments.

The problem I want to raise with the Minister is that our local Money Advice Service was not able to get a response from the DWP. It was only when my caseworkers got involved that the £15,000 my constituent was owed was repaid. What will the Minister do to ensure that DWP staff are responding in a timely manner to Money Advice staff?

Justin Tomlinson: I am very sorry to hear about that, because what we would like to see—there are many, many cases of best practice—is local support organisations working hand in hand with local jobcentres, so that the most vulnerable claimants in particular get additional support as they go through the system.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Despite the Minister’s words about paying more money, I am afraid it seems to me that he is robbing Peter to pay Paul. Given the weakness of local advice services, particularly in rural areas such as mine, will the Minister provide hon. Members with a breakdown of the geographical distribution of the 10,000 or so cases so that we can reach out properly?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman, whom I have worked with closely on other issues. To be absolutely clear, in going from the legacy benefit to universal benefit, we have not taken money out but are targeting it at the most vulnerable people. Overall, our spending on those with disabilities and long-term health conditions has increased by £5 billion per year. The key is that all jobcentres will have the support of Citizens Advice to provide additional support for claimants who want it.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): A constituent of mine who was forced on to universal credit with no protections lost a considerable amount of money to help with her living costs when her severe disability premium stopped. Now we learn that she may have to wait six months to see any money, even when the regulations are passed. How on earth are disabled people supposed to cope in the meantime?

Justin Tomlinson: The priority in our reforms is to make sure that the most vulnerable get the most support within the system. Without knowing all the details of that case, it is difficult to comment, but I am happy to look at the details.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Has the Department contacted all those who have lost out on payments? If not, will the Department do so? Will the Minister commit to ensuring that absolutely no burden is placed on claimants in applying for back payments of the severe disability premium, and that his Department will take on the burden of gathering the available evidence to ensure that payments are made as soon as possible?

Justin Tomlinson: The judgment was given only on Friday, but we are urgently considering all the options available to us. Once we are in a position to do so, we absolutely will make sure that we communicate with all claimants.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Minister not got the message that this system is not working? As has been pointed out repeatedly, it is not working. About a fortnight ago, I visited one of the biggest food banks in the west midlands. They are the ones helping people who cannot claim their benefits. Why do the Government not scrap it and start again?
Justin Tomlinson: I could not disagree more. Under the legacy benefits—the benefits the hon. Gentleman is seemingly advocating that we go back to—700,000 of the most vulnerable people, many of whom are those using the food banks, are missing out on £2.4 billion of support.

Mr Cunningham indicated dissent.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman can shake his head, but these are some of the most vulnerable people. We are creating a simpler, clearer system so that those vulnerable people do not miss out on the support they are entitled to.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): It is rather frustrating that, yet again with this Government, people have had to go to court before they get some change and acknowledgement. I know and respect the Minister, as he has been very helpful to me on a number of issues. Will he just give a commitment on the Floor of the House that the DWP will ensure that anyone who has missed out on severe disability premium will have retrospective payments so that, ultimately, they get what they are entitled to?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I have enjoyed working with him on a number of issues. Obviously we only saw the judgment on Friday, and we must consider the options. The issue was additional support through the gateway, and we will have to look at that, but we remain committed to ensuring that those who are part of the full transition will receive the full support.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport to update the House on the bidding process for the East Midlands rail franchise.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): As has previously been confirmed in a written ministerial statement and at the Dispatch Box on several occasions, Abellio was awarded the contract after presenting the Department with a compliant bid, following a rigorous competition that was consistent with public procurement rules. Our assessment of bids has been comprehensive and fair and I have absolute confidence in the process. It was a fair, open competition and Abellio provided the best bid for passengers, in which it demonstrated that it would not only meet but exceed the Department’s specifications. The Department’s procurement process is absolutely clear: submitting a non-compliant bid that rejected the commercial terms on offer, as Stagecoach chose to do, can lead to disqualification.

We have a winner. Abellio won the competition with a compliant bid. We are currently in the standstill period, which is a standard part of procurement practice. Within that period, the Department is able to answer unsuccessful or disqualified bidders’ questions, enabling them fully to understand the details of the decision that has been made. Towards the end of the standstill period, the Department received a request for further information from one of the bidders and, in view of that, we decided to extend the period until tomorrow, 8 May. After that, we will be looking forward to the mobilisation from the successful bidder, which will lead to improved services for those who use the East Midlands franchise. Abellio will invest more than £600 million in trains and stations between August this year and 2027. Meanwhile, the Government will continue their £1.5 billion upgrade of the midland main line, which is the biggest upgrade since its completion in 1870. That is part of our £48 billion investment to modernise our railways over the next five years.

Andy McDonald: During Transport questions last Thursday, the shadow rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), asked about the non-compliance of bidders for the East Midlands rail franchise. The Transport Secretary, who is not present, dismissed her questions as inaccurate and incorrect. However, according to a formal legal disclosure from the Department for Transport, which was published on 15 April and sent with the full authority of the Secretary of State,

“All bids contained some non-compliances.”

The ministerial code requires Ministers to make truthful and accurate statements to Parliament, so will the Transport Secretary now correct the record and rectify the inaccurate and incorrect statement that he made to the House last week?

Given that all bidders for East Midlands were non-compliant, will the Minister tell us how the non-compliances of the respective bidders were assessed? The Department has mandatory and discretionary levers over non-
compliances in franchise bids. Can the Minister explain how the criteria were applied during the evaluation of bids for East Midlands?

The leak of the Stagecoach bid details to Abellio during the bidding casts further doubt on the integrity of the process. Why did it take months for the data-breach investigation to start and why was it so limited? Given last week’s cancellation of the ferry contracts and now this latest debacle, is there not serious doubt about the Transport Secretary’s ability to procure services? Will the Minister’s boss sign off the East Midlands franchise contract this week, in view of the serious concerns about the transparency of the process? Given the appalling record of defending legal challenges to failed procurement decisions—Eurotunnel and P&O being cases in point—what contingency plans are there to defend future legal action against the East Midlands award?

In 2012, rail franchising went into meltdown on the west coast main line. Seven years on, it has never been clearer that it is not working and will never work. It needs to end, and to end now.

Andrew Jones: Let me deal with the hon. Gentleman’s questions one at a time. In a complex procurement process such as this, or indeed in other complex public sector procurements, it is a matter of course that there may be small technical non-compliances. These could include, for example, incorrect font sizes or submitting bids in the wrong format—in docx rather than in PDF, or vice versa. This does not constitute a material non-compliance, which would affect the compliance of the bid as a whole. What would be a serious issue would be something like the reallocation of risk, or acceptance or non-acceptance of the commercial terms that have been offered. That is where the difference between material and non-material would come in.

We have been clear at the outset that non-compliance risks exclusion and Stagecoach chose to put in a materially non-compliant bid rejecting the commercial terms on offer. In doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to more non-compliant bids rejecting the commercial terms on offer in doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to more non-compliant bids rejecting the commercial terms on offer in doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to more non-compliant bids rejecting the commercial terms on offer in doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to more non-compliant bids rejecting the commercial terms on offer in doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to more non-compliant bids rejecting the commercial terms on offer in doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to more non-compliant bids rejecting the commercial terms on offer in doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to more non-compliant bids rejecting the commercial terms on offer in doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to more non-compliant bids rejecting the commercial terms on offer in doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The comment from the hon. Gentleman was that the Secretary of State had misled the House. The Abellio bid was won in a competitive franchise process and it won with a compliant bid. The comments by the Secretary of State were, therefore, accurate. I am aware of the media story, but it is wrong. He does not need to correct the record. The Abellio bid was compliant and has been won in an open, fair and consistent way. We look forward to seeing the benefits of that for the passengers on the East Midlands network.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the rail Minister confirm that under the terms of the new franchise passengers from Kettering will enjoy the reintroduction of two trains an hour going north from Kettering, which had been taken away, extra seat capacity on the Corby to London service and the introduction of electrification to Kettering by 2020?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes, as ever, a wise point on behalf of the constituents he serves so well. The point about this franchise, and indeed all our franchises, is that they bring benefits for the travelling public. This franchise will do just that. It will be delivering more trains from Kettering, it will be delivering more seats from Corby, and the Government as a whole through their electrification of a significant part of the midland main line will be delivering the electrification that he specified. So his constituents will be receiving a better service in both quantity and quality as a result of this franchise award.

Mr Speaker: I trust the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) will go about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step, buoyed by knowledge of the approbation he has received from the Minister on the Treasury Bench describing him as “wise”; I have a feeling it will be framed and appear in an important and public part of the hon. Gentleman’s home.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): There will be concern in Chesterfield that the East Midlands rail service currently provided by Stagecoach will no longer be in place. In terms of what the Minister is able to tell us about the process, how many fully compliant bids were there? In terms of the process going forward, what benefits will constituents in Chesterfield see when we move to Abellio trains?

Andrew Jones: The Department wants to provide bidding feedback to those who have been unsuccessful or disqualified, but it has never given bidding feedback in public in relation to losing bids. That would not be particularly fair on those who have bid, and there are commercial confidentiality points that could have market implications, so we have never done that. I am aware that some of the bidders have made public statements themselves, but that is up to them. I do not think it is up to me. The people of Chesterfield will be able to look forward to an enhanced service. We have put out an interactive map that details the benefits for all the different areas of the franchise award. It is publicly accessible on the Department for Transport website and the hon. Gentleman might be interested in looking at that. Separately, I will of course write to him with the details of what will happen for the people of Chesterfield as a result of this franchise award.
Colin Clark: Can the rail Minister assure me and the House that he will continue to ensure good value for money for taxpayers and for passengers, unlike Labour, which allowed fare rises of 13% during its time in government? I was once a resident of the east of England and therefore used the rails.

Andrew Jones: I am absolutely clear that we will continue to seek good value for money for fare payers and taxpayers through the franchising process. The amount of money that is being invested in our railways is at a record level, because the Government believe strongly in rail underpinning our economy and our move for clean growth. Fares are obviously a matter of some concern, but I remind my hon. Friend that we are in the sixth year of freezing fares in line with inflation, which is in marked contrast to the fare system that we inherited when we came into government. I think there were fare increases of up to 10% in the previous Government’s last year. We will focus on delivering not only better value but better quality and quantity at that better value.

Anna Soubry: Never before have I heard a question on East Midlands trains that begin at St Pancras and terminate in Sheffield being asked by someone from north of the border, but the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) is always welcome to come and enjoy the midland main line.

In any event, this is a serious matter, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Toby Perkins) said, there will be concern about this franchise and the manner in which this has been done. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) and I met Abellio on Friday, and I put that squarely on the table. I have a concern about the level of expectation. The Minister rightly speaks about new trains being introduced, about refurbishment and about bi-mode trains, but none of that will come on stream for at least three years: there are high expectations, but they will not be delivered.

My real question to the Minister is this. It is my understanding that those train doors that have to be slammed—the ones where people have to reach up through the window to turn the handle on the outside when they want to open or close the doors—are rightly going to be made unlawful in order to comply with rules, regulations and laws covering people with mobility difficulties. Can he confirm that, in order to satisfy those laws, there will have to be new trains? Can he also confirm that that cannot be done in time for January next year? In that event, what are the Government going to do?

Andrew Jones: I am sure that expectations are high; they always are higher at the start of a franchise. We have been talking about the customer benefits that will flow from the £600 million that Abellio is investing in trains and stations along the franchise. I understand the right hon. Lady’s point about how benefits can sometimes be delayed, and there has, on occasion, been a sense of jam tomorrow in the delivery of timely upgrades for our railways, but this is a positive announcement and it should be welcomed as such. I recognise that change can cause challenges for people who are used to dealing with a particular operator. That is inevitable whenever we have a change of franchise operator—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. Blurt it out!

Andrew Jones: Blurt it out I will. In terms of PRM compliance—compliance with regulations covering passengers with reduced mobility—I am extremely keen that all our train operating companies should have trains that are PRM compliant by the end of the year. That is the expectation that we have of them.

Martin Vickers: East Midlands services that run from Cleethorpes extend to Lincoln and Newark. In the not-too-distant past, we used to have services through to Nottingham, Leicester and even more exotic places. Could the Minister give an assurance that Abellio will look at extending the services out of Cleethorpes? Will he urge it to ensure that they are not provided by a single unit? The services, particularly those to Lincoln, are frequently overcrowded, especially after they stop at Market Rasen in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh).

Andrew Jones: I am not sure we can describe Leicester as an exotic destination, but I understand the point that my hon. Friend is making. It is a key part of the economy and the central part of this country and its connectivity is therefore very important, as he highlights. I will have to check and have a further conversation with Abellio and then write to my hon. Friend with the answer to his question.

Mr Jim Cunningham: There have been press reports again today regarding who is responsible for pensions, particularly in relation to Virgin contracts and Stagecoach. Can the Minister clear that up? What is he trying to achieve? Who is responsible for paying the pensions?

Andrew Jones: The responsibility for paying train operator pensions is the responsibility of the train operator. That is the case with the franchises that have just been awarded and are being considered, and it has always been the case since franchising came into form 25 years ago. There are no plans to change that. There are no plans to change that. Train operators have the responsibility and we expect them to fulfil it.

Tom Pursglove: Is the Minister confident that the new contract will deliver positive benefits for rail users in Corby and east Northamptonshire and that the transition from the old contract to the new will be seamless?

Andrew Jones: There will be significant benefits for the constituents whom my hon. Friend serves so well. Those benefits will be in the form of new trains and significantly increased capacity, particularly with the connectivity into London. There are significant benefits for those he represents. There is obviously operational risk with the handover from one franchise to the next, but many of the staff will TUPE over, as is standard when a franchise changes. I expect all sides to go through the process with good will to ensure that customers are at the centre of their thinking.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I wonder whether there is a way to formalise this slot as an urgent question to the Secretary of State for Transport, because this is clearly a weekly event that could be formalised in the parliamentary calendar.

My question to the Minister is this: what is the Secretary of State’s responsibility when it comes to making market-sensitive information available? Given how leaky the Government are, was it appropriate to leave nine days between disqualifying Stagecoach and announcing its disqualification?

Andrew Jones: After the decision has been made within the Department for Transport, there has to be a period of communication with other Departments, such as the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. That is entirely standard in public procurement. It is not a question of the Government sitting on their hands within the Department. There was a standard process. That is typical in rail franchises, as it is in other parts of public procurement. I am aware of the press story, but it is simply wrong.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The Minister will be aware that the East Midlands service between Derby, Stoke and north Staffordshire, run by East Midlands Trains, is inadequate. It is often only one carriage and overcrowded. Can he assure me that that service will be improved under the new franchise?

Andrew Jones: I can assure my hon. Friend that the service will be significantly enhanced. That enhancement will take the form of more services, particularly earlier in the day, including on a Sunday—I know he and others along that route have campaigned for that. The trains themselves will be new and much bigger. I am aware that the service is often a single carriage and is absolutely full. That is an indication of the pent-up demand along that line. That is why we will be seeing more services to meet that need.

Bombardier

4.19 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Urgent Question

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the decision by Bombardier to sell its operations in Northern Ireland.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): Last Thursday, Bombardier Inc. announced its plans to sell its Belfast aerostructures and engineering services operations. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has spoken to Alain Bellemare, Bombardier’s chief executive, and Michael Ryan, the head of its Belfast operations, about this decision.

The decision is a change of strategy for Bombardier, and we have asked the company to explain it. Bombardier has told us it is a strategic decision so that the company can focus on its transportation division, which includes trains and business jets. The company will be consolidating its aerospace assets into a single business unit with core operations in Canada, the USA and Mexico, while selling its Northern Ireland and Morocco units. Bombardier has said it will continue to be committed to rail transportation in the United Kingdom.

I recognise this is unwelcome news for the Northern Irish workforce across the company’s sites in Belfast, Dunmurry, Newtownards and Newtownabbey and for their families. It is deeply regrettable that they face further uncertainty about their future. We have been assured by Bombardier that it is committed to finding the right buyer and will not rush to sell at any price. Bombardier has said it will secure a buyer that will operate responsibly and will help the buyer to achieve its full growth potential.

The Belfast plant, its expertise and its highly skilled and dedicated staff will be highly sought after, and we will be working with potential buyers to take this successful and ambitious business forward. Bombardier has committed to no further job losses at the Short Brothers factory in Belfast and has paused the redundancy process from its November 2018 restructuring announcement. The management team will still continue to drive ongoing transformation initiatives to improve productivity and increase competitiveness.

The Short Brothers factory employs around 3,600 skilled workers, with a large number of them working on the A220 aircraft joint venture programme with Airbus. It also supports a supply chain of hundreds of companies and many more jobs in the UK. Bombardier’s commitment to the Short Brothers factory has transformed the business, changing it to a state-of-the-art wing factory with a healthy order book. The Belfast plant is a vital asset to the UK’s world-leading aerospace sector and is a centre of excellence in advanced composites and in the design and manufacture of some of the most high-value components in aerospace manufacturing.

We are committed to helping ensure that the Belfast facility continues to be successful. Last year, when the A220 aircraft joint venture was launched, both Bombardier and Airbus made a number of important commitments to the Business Secretary, including that wing manufacturing will continue in Belfast, that the treatment of UK sites...
and suppliers will be equal to that of other Bombardier and Airbus suppliers and that the strategy will be one of building on existing capabilities. I expect those commitments to be respected.

We will continue to work closely with the company, the unions and the Northern Ireland Departments while this process is under way.

Tony Lloyd: I welcome the Minister to the Front Bench. He is right to describe Bombardier as a company of vital importance. The workforce, of course, are both dedicated and highly skilled, but that of itself does not express the importance of Bombardier to the Northern Ireland economy. This is a world-class operation and an icon of Northern Ireland’s capacity to deliver world-class manufacturing and production. The company represents some 10% of Northern Ireland’s manufacturing output, and, as he says, it employs some 3,600 people across its different sites in Northern Ireland, but that only partially tells the story of a company with a supply chain that employs many, many more—some in Northern Ireland and some in other parts of the United Kingdom. Bombardier’s decision comes as a genuine shock and will lead to potential dismay. The Minister tells us that Bombardier has made commitments to try to maintain the site’s viability.

I would like to draw the House’s attention to comments made by the Moroccan Industry Minister, because Morocco is in the same position as Northern Ireland in this context. Moulay Hafid Elalamy has confirmed that Bombardier’s Casablanca factory operations will continue after Bombardier sells it plants. We look to the Minister to give the same kind of assurance to the people of Northern Ireland, the UK and beyond that Bombardier will make sure that the current workforce, skills base and production will continue uncathed.

In that context, the Minister has told us that conversations have taken place between the Secretary of State and Bombardier’s management. Will the Minister tell us whether there are plans to meet the representatives of the workforce—the trade unions involved? They are particularly keen—I agree with them on this—that the Secretary of State should hold a summit involving all the key partners, not simply the company and the workforce, but other stakeholders, including Members of this House and others elsewhere. It is important that a combined effort across Northern Ireland is made to ensure that we salvage what is proper from this announcement. Can the Minister, once again, establish that Bombardier will be sold as a total going concern? It matters enormously that we do not see a vulture company coming in, stripping its assets and its workforce and denuding both Northern Ireland and the UK of the Bombardier capacity.

Those with a good memory will recall that when Short Brothers, the predecessor company, was in public ownership, public money went into this site. What is the legacy of that public money? Can the Minister give assurances that Bombardier is committed to making sure that there is proper legacy for its workforce in Northern Ireland? Will consideration be given by his colleagues, probably those in the Treasury, as to whether enhanced funding should be provided for the Belfast city deal? Obviously, this announcement will create pressures on the Belfast city region and the people who live there.

The final point I wish to make to the Minister is a simple one. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland cannot be with us today, for perfectly valid reasons—she is hosting five-party talks in Northern Ireland—but it is important that this Government do everything they can to see the Northern Ireland Executive back in operation. Were the Executive in place today, this would make both the Minister’s task and the future of Bombardier much less complicated.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for the tone of his remarks, and I agree with him completely on the importance of Bombardier. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that it is a jewel in the crown of not only Northern Irish manufacturing, but the whole UK aerospace sector. It is therefore vital that we all work together to do everything we can to ensure the future of this site and its workforce.

The hon. Gentleman posed a range of questions that I wish to touch on. I am more than happy to meet the unions and workers’ representatives to talk about this issue, and to visit Northern Ireland to see what we can do. It is important that we find the right buyer for this company, which has a good order book and is profitable. Like other companies in the aerospace sector, it has huge growth potential in the coming years. I will not rehearse the statistics now, but they show huge growth potential in the aerospace sector, and Bombardier is well positioned to capitalise on it.

The Government continue to work to support the wider Northern Irish economy. A heads of terms agreement for the Belfast city deal was agreed by the UK Government, Northern Irish government and Belfast regional partners in March 2019. The Belfast region city deal will see the UK Government invest £350 million into the Belfast region over the next 15 years. In addition, work is ongoing between the UK Government and local partners on a funding announcement for a Londonderry/Derry regional city deal. As has been said, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is not here—obviously, she is doing good work in Northern Ireland at the moment—but I stand ready to work with her and other Ministers to ensure that all necessary support is given to the workers at this site going forward.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee paid a visit to the Belfast plant of Bombardier last November during which we saw a highly skilled workforce carrying out fantastic work in the manufacture of aircraft wings with a high level of expertise. We also saw the benefits of the £2.7 billion investment that has been made in the plant since 1989. Does the Minister agree that it is important to reassure not only customers of Bombardier, which provides for the families of aircraft that Bombardier itself produces, but external customers such as Airbus with its A220 programme?

Andrew Stephenson: I agree that this site is very much a going concern. Bombardier has made it clear that it will look for the right buyer for this site. It does not intend to close it. As part of a strategic overview of its business, it has decided that this site, along with the
Morocco site, should go up for sale. The Government have worked consistently with the site, and, since 2017, more than £20 million has been invested in research and development activity at the Belfast plant to develop new products and to improve efficiency.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I had the privilege of visiting Bombardier last year as part of an Industry and Parliament Trust delegation. I was blown away both by the scale of the plant and by the highly specialised processes that were being undertaken there. Three thousand six hundred jobs is a massive figure. To put that in context, that represents 4.5% of the entire workforce in Northern Ireland, and when we take into account the supply chain, the figure becomes even greater.

According to Bombardier, Brexit is not a factor in the decision to sell the business, but when we were there on that visit, concerns were raised about Brexit and the impact of the removal of the UK from the single market and customs union. Whether or not Brexit had a role to play in this decision, the current situation will affect the search for a new owner. Airbus wings are built by Bombardier, and Tom Enders, the chief executive of Airbus, has said that the UK’s aerospace sector now stands at the precipice and that Brexit uncertainty is a disgrace. Is the Minister listening to the message from the site’s key customer and is he doing everything in his power to ensure that the UK does remain within the single market and customs union? Is he aware of any firm willing to purchase the site?

Finally, what steps is he taking to protect this highly skilled workforce, and how will he ensure that these skilled workers remain in Northern Ireland?

Andrew Stephenson: I have been assured that Bombardier is committed to finding the right buyer for the site. It has said that it will find one that will operate responsibly and help the company to achieve its full growth potential. The Belfast plant, its expertise and highly skilled and dedicated staff will be highly sought after and the Government will work with potential buyers to take this successful and ambitious business forward. Bombardier is a global business that operates in 28 sites across the world and it has made it clear that Brexit was not a factor in this decision.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given the world-class technical skills of the Northern Ireland workforce, is the Minister optimistic that the right buyer can be found? Given the continued railway expansion in this country and the need for more rolling stock, does he welcome Bombardier’s continued commitment to the railway sector?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. This will be a highly sought-after company, and I imagine that there will be a range of people interested in buying the site. Bombardier has made it very clear that, in terms of its other divisions in the UK, particularly in rolling stock, it intends to stay firmly involved in the provision of new rolling stock, and I look forward to visiting Bombardier’s facility on Thursday.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am co-chair of the all-party manufacturing group and very heavily involved in air safety. Is not the news today about Bombardier a disaster for British industry and British aerospace? This is a prime globally known company and a prime contractor of Airbus, and the news today is a sign of what is happening in high-tech industries and the car industry: they are moving out of Britain and taking out their investment. This is a disaster. Every Minister should be aware that this is not a canary singing, but a canary falling off its perch.

Andrew Stephenson: Like other companies in the growing aerospace sector, Bombardier is transforming itself. In 2015—way before Brexit—the company announced a five-year plan to transform the business to reduce costs and to improve profitability and competitiveness, while also launching commercial and business jet programmes. Bombardier has been very clear that the decision to sell off the Northern Irish site and the Morocco site—definitely nothing to do with Brexit—has nothing to do with Brexit.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an opportunity for UK-owned and UK-based companies to re-enter the major civilian aerospace sector, and that this is not just an opportunity to see it sold to some foreign-based buyer? It is our second biggest manufacturing sector after the automotive sector, and we now have the opportunity to see it come back into British hands.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. This is a golden opportunity for a number of businesses in the sector and for businesses that want to expand into the sector. It is a growing, profitable business that would make a sensible investment for anyone.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for raising this question and pay tribute to Members across the House who have shown support over the last number of years for Bombardier in my constituency and the constituencies of the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry); I particularly thank them for their commitment over many years.

I also thank the Minister for taking an interest in this case. I was very grateful to the Secretary of State for his phone call on Thursday and recognise the commitment that he has shown to this key part of our industry in Northern Ireland—and, indeed, to the UK aviation sector—over the last period.

The Minister knows the importance of Bombardier and its significance to our economy. Can he therefore assure us that he will maintain the jobs in Belfast and surrounding areas, the industry, the innovation and the skill that we are benefiting from and that the whole world will?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. He is a huge champion for his constituents and all the workers at the site. My constituency of Pendle is dominated by the aerospace sector and is home to a large Rolls-Royce fan blade factory, so I know the importance of these highly skilled and well-paid aerospace jobs. I will do everything I can, working with the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends, to ensure that we secure all the jobs at the Bombardier Belfast site.
Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the substantial investment that Bombardier has recently made in Biggin Hill, where its new business aircraft service centre is creating many opportunities for young people in the London Borough of Bromley?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is correct to point out that Bombardier is a growing company that is investing in different sectors; it is just strategically realigning itself. I look forward to visiting a different Bombardier site on Thursday—not the one my hon. Friend mentioned—to talk about other investments within the UK. The decision to sell its operations in Northern Ireland is regrettable, but we will work with the company to ensure that the right buyer is found.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Members will recall that the American Government took legal action against Bombardier about 18 months ago, so how big a part did the United States play in this decision? The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said that this affects 4.5% of the workforce in Northern Ireland, but we can multiply that figure by two or three if we include the supply chain as well, so the problem is much bigger than people realise. We had a similar statement on GKN a couple of weeks ago; is the Minister being conned on this?

Andrew Stephenson: Bombardier has told us that this is a strategic decision so that the company can focus on its transportation division, which includes trains and business jets. We have been told that it has not been influenced by any other factors. This is a strategic decision by the company so that it can focus on certain key parts of its core operation.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister described the strategic realignment that Bombardier has spoken about, but he has also no doubt spoken to ADS—on behalf of the aerospace industry—and heard about the huge concern that exists in aerospace manufacturing about the fact that the Government are unable to come up with a permanent customs arrangement or even to get a deal through this Parliament. Given all the discussions he has had, what impact will the Government’s current Brexit position have on the likelihood of these Bombardier jobs being secured and a new buyer found?

Andrew Stephenson: The large aerospace businesses I have talked to—including Rolls-Royce, which has a plant in my constituency—have been very clear that MPs should vote for the deal, and I am proud that I voted for it three times.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I accept that there is not very much the Government can do, but will the Minister set out what it might be possible to do in identifying or facilitating the identification of any new buyer? On retraining, although hopefully that will not be necessary, what sort of package might the Government be willing to put in place if it does prove necessary in future?

Andrew Stephenson: At the current time, we are going to be focused on finding the right buyer. We will work across government to ensure that the right buyer is found. If there are already existing purchasers involved, that is commercially sensitive and something for the company.

I very much hope that we never have to look at any sort of retraining package for the site. Obviously, if we did I would come back to the House on it. However, this is a growing, profitable business—one of the jewels in the crown of UK aerospace—and I would imagine that buyers for this site are lining up to invest in the jobs and skills in Northern Ireland.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): One of the finest visits I had the honour of making when I was a business Minister was to this remarkable factory in Belfast. I went with the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). They are indeed a highly skilled workforce making a world-class product. It was remarkable to see those wings being made. Does the Minister not agree, though, that British aerospace has basically been built on the fact that we are a member of the European Union, that any potential buyer will surely not be attracted even to the brilliant workforce with this outstanding product when we leave—if we leave—the European Union, and that the truth and reality is now dawning on many people that the best deal with the European Union is the deal that we currently have?

Andrew Stephenson: No, I would respectfully disagree. I think we need to provide certainty for all sectors of our economy. We have seen a range of recent investments in the aerospace sector across the United Kingdom, but we have also seen businesses restructure, as in this business with huge growth potential, as the sector looks to realign itself for the growth potentials in future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) rose—

Mr Speaker: What a difficult choice—Strangford against East Antrim. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I thank the Minister for his reply to these questions. I represent Strangford, as Mr Speaker said and others here will know as well. The factory in Newtownards is part of the Bombardier business, and I want to speak on its behalf. Last year, I had an opportunity to visit the Belfast site in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and to understand its importance and the experience of its skilled workforce. It seems that there are three companies interested in Bombardier. Has the Minister had time to discuss the possibility of a partnership with Airbus, with Airbus owning 50.1% of the shares, thereby cementing the wing technology in the United Kingdom, and 49.9% owned by Bombardier, with voting shares retained by Bombardier? That is very similar to the partnership in the Airbus C Series, now the Airbus A320.

Mr Speaker: I do hope that the hon. Gentleman now feels that he has fully ventilated his concerns, at least for now.

Andrew Stephenson: Any discussions that are ongoing between Bombardier and potential buyers are of course commercially sensitive. However, one would imagine that a company like Airbus, which is so reliant on this
excellent company providing so many components to it, would be taking an active interest in the company and how it goes forward.

**Sammy Wilson:** I bet you wish you had chosen me the first time, Mr Speaker.

The people of Northern Ireland appreciate the political and financial commitments that Governments of all shades in this House have given over the years to keeping aircraft manufacturing alive in Northern Ireland. Bombardier’s lease was due to be renewed this year. When it was privatised, a peppercorn rent was made available for the site—it is a very land-intensive industry—which is a fraction of a per cent. of what the commercial rent would be. That could be a deal breaker when it comes to the sale of the site. What discussions has the Minister had, or will he have, with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners about setting a level of rent that ensures that operations can continue on the site?

**Mr Speaker:** The right hon. Gentleman was not to be outdone by his hon. Friend.

**Andrew Stephenson:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. Three weeks into the job, I have not had any conversations with them yet, but I look forward to doing so because, as he says, that could be very worthwhile as we look to secure the future of this company and all those whose livelihoods depend on it.

---

**Places of Worship: Security Funding**

4.45 pm

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about security in our places of worship. Yesterday marked the start of Ramadan, a peaceful time of prayer and reflection. Throughout the holy month, Muslims will come together in mosques to celebrate. The tragic events in Christchurch, New Zealand, will never be far from their minds, and the 51 innocent souls who were slaughtered in March will be remembered in many prayers. A terrorist gunned down these Muslim men, women and children as they prayed. A few weeks later, Christians were massacred by terrorists in Sri Lankan churches as they observed their faith on Easter Sunday. More victims were targeted in hotels, with a total of over 250 lives lost. Just days ago, a gunman stormed a synagogue near San Diego, killing an innocent woman on the last day of Passover. Each one of those atrocities was heartbreaking and tragic, and my thoughts are with every single person who has been affected. I know that the House will join me in condemning these hate-fuelled attacks on our freedom and values.

This slaughter has sent shockwaves through our religious communities. People are understandably worried. Many members of my own family contacted me after Christchurch to seek reassurance. They asked, “Just what are you doing to stop this happening here?” With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to answer that and provide some much-needed reassurance.

There can be no doubt that people have been targeted because of their religion in terrorist attacks around the world, but also in vile hate crimes on the streets of this country—sledgehammer attacks on mosques, a Christian preacher spat at in the street, and a brick thrown through the glass door of a synagogue. I condemn all these attacks with every fibre of my being. No one should be targeted because of what they believe. Everyone, of every faith, deserves the right to observe their religion without fear, and we are doing all we can to ensure that this remains the case in the UK and that our fundamental values are preserved.

Mr Speaker, allow me to update the House on some of the work that is under way to protect our religious freedom. First, I have increased the places of worship protective security fund to £1.6 million for 2019–20—double the amount awarded last year. Expressions of interest are now open for the next round of the fund, which will open in July. Since the scheme launched in 2016, more than £1.5 million has been awarded, with 63 grants to churches, 49 to mosques, five to Hindu temples and 16 to gurdwaras. They have paid for security equipment such as CCTV, security lighting, new locks or fences. Many more places of worship will now benefit after we made it even easier to apply this year, by removing the need to find multiple quotes and contractors. A separate £14 million grant also provides security for Jewish schools and synagogues against terror attacks.

Secondly, a new £5 million fund will provide security training for places of worship across England and Wales. This funding will support the physical security measures provided by the places of worship fund. It will share best practice and help faith organisations to understand how best to protect their worshippers.
Thirdly, we are consulting religious communities on what more can and should be done to help them. We will shortly announce a programme of engagement, to help us understand what they need and how to make it work in a faith setting. This listening exercise will inform how the £5 million security training fund is spent to ensure that it is effective and will help ascertain how we can best protect worshippers.

Fourthly, we are providing immediate help with a Ramadan package of support for mosques. We know that Muslims are anxious for their safety after the atrocity in Christchurch, and that tensions are heightened during religious festivals. So we are supporting Faith Associates to provide security training and advice for the Islamic holy month. Support is being given in 12 workshops around England and Wales, and guidance is being distributed to over 2,000 mosques, community centres and madrassahs.

Finally, our world-class police provide a vital protection role to all places of worship. Patrols near mosques were stepped up following the Christchurch attack to provide much-needed reassurance and the police have increased activity around religious festivals and holy days, including the Ramadan period. Our security services work tirelessly to disrupt all terror threats known to this country. This includes tackling the growing threat from the far right, with more than four such terrorist plots disrupted since the beginning of 2017. We are also using a range of other powers to tackle the threat of terrorism and extremism in this country. Our robust hate crime legislation has seen far-right influencers jailed for a range of offences, including religiously aggravated harassment. As Home Secretary, I can exclude foreign nationals from entering the UK if I believe that their presence would not be conducive to the public good—a power that I can and do use to stop hate preachers stirring up tension here. I have used that power eight times since I became Home Secretary.

Our Prevent and Building a Stronger Britain Together programmes work with and through local communities to challenge terrorist or extremist ideologies from Islamist to the far right.

Together, this comprehensive package of support provides protection for all our places of worship. We know that there are deep and genuine concerns in religious communities; we know that people are feeling vulnerable and scared, but have no doubt that I am listening to these concerns and we are responding. The diversity of this country and our shared values of tolerance and respect are what make us truly great. We will never allow those who seek to divide us to win. The freedom to practise any religion or none is a cornerstone of our democratic society. People must have the peace of mind to worship without fear, and I am doing everything within my power to make this possible. I commend this statement to the House.

4.52 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for prior sight of his statement. The Opposition welcome his statement in principle, particularly the Ramadan package. We are aware that there is particular fear in some of our communities as we enter the period of Ramadan. However, we reserve the right to return to the subject as the detail of implementation becomes clear.

Across the world we are seeing a rise in terror attacks especially on people in their place of worship. The House should contemplate what it means to be gathered together to pray to your God and find yourself a victim of murder and terrorism. In Sri Lanka we saw more than 200 people die, including hundreds of people at Easter services in Christian churches. We all saw the images of the terrorist entering the church with the rucksack on his back, patting a small child on the head and then proceeding to blow up the innocent worshippers.

This followed the terror attacks in Christchurch on Muslim worshippers, which claimed the lives of 50 people and injured 40 more. The attack was livestreamed on Facebook. Most recently, a gunman stormed a synagogue, killing an innocent woman on the last day of Passover. The concern must be that, in this era of online, when someone can literally livestream their terror, there is a danger of copycat incidents. That is one of the things that has inspired fear in different communities.

On this side of the House, we want to make it clear that these terror attacks are murderous and vile, whether they come from admirers of al-Qaeda or ISIS or from admirers of tinpot Adolf Hitlers. As we move towards the European elections, sadly, we may well see a rise in far right activity, which may seek to mirror some of the terrorist attacks that we have seen. That is why we believe that this statement is timely and to be welcomed.

These terror attacks spread ripples of violence throughout communities and countries. The Metropolitan police report that racist and religious hate crimes in London hit their highest levels in a year immediately following the Christchurch mosque shootings. Tell MAMA, the Muslim community organisation, said that there was an almost sixfold increase in reports to its monitoring service immediately after the Christchurch attack. Separately, the Community Security Trust also reports rising incidents. My own Haredi Jewish community in Stamford Hill have seen a steep rise in attacks; sadly, they do not always report them to the police, although I am working with them to encourage them to go to the authorities after all such incidents. There have been similar reports from police forces and monitoring community organisations across the country.

The proposals that the Home Secretary has announced are both timely and appropriate, but we will follow up some of the measures. For instance, the Opposition will wish to know where the £5 million security training fund is being allocated, and which organisations have applied for and been awarded the funding. My experience is that sometimes those who obtain Government funding fail to provide the support that they have promised. We will want to know who is able to access and benefit from the Ramadan package of support for mosques. We are not accusing Ministers of bad faith, but we are saying that all too often, when it comes to allocating such funding,
the people who know about it and are skilled at making applications benefit, although they may not necessarily be the most vulnerable and needy communities.

We welcome the fact that the police are providing vital protection to all places of worship, although I say gently to the Home Secretary that the situation is not helped by the cuts in police numbers since 2010. Our main point is that nobody should have to go to their place of worship and feel fear. Nobody should feel that horrible incidents such as we have seen internationally may be reflected in their mosque, church or gurdwara. We also say that some Muslim community centres are next to mosques; we hope that they can get some help, support and protection also.

The terrorist incidents that we have been seeing are both frightening and tragic. We as a House must assure vulnerable communities of our intent to support them, whether financially or in other ways. I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement, but he can be assured that we will be following up how it actually unfolds in practice.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for the tone of her remarks and for her support. I think it is reassuring for members of the public watching or listening to know that everyone in this House is united in the determination to protect people in all places of worship, whatever their faith, in every way we can. I very much welcome her comments.

The right hon. Lady rightly started by condemning the recent terrorist attacks around the world—in Christchurch, Sri Lanka and San Diego. She was also right to make a link between those attacks and what she called the ripple effect—the rise in recorded hate crime that we have sadly seen here in our own country. I know she shares our absolute determination to ensure we do everything we can to where hate crime is reported. People must always feel that they can go ahead and report that crime. Letting the police know enables them to investigate it and take action.

The right hon. Lady said she would follow up on the package, and I hope she does. That is exactly what I would expect of her and I very much welcome it. She is very good at following up on things. That will help us, working together, to ensure we are doing all we can to support our communities. She was right to raise the issue of how we can ensure the fund is allocated as quickly and as efficiently as possible. That is why I referred in my statement to changes I am making to the application rules. In the past the fund has, I think, required at least three estimates for putting up CCTV from different certified contractors. I think we can simplify the rules. We are doing that and it will help to make it more straightforward.

The right hon. Lady raised the £5 million that I announced for training. I think we have a collective desire to ensure it is utilised quickly, properly and efficiently, and that all communities and all faith groups feel they have access and support. That is exactly why we have already started the consultation with faith groups, community representatives and others to make sure we are listening to them about the best way to use the £5 million.

All of us in this House share a determination to ensure that people in our country can worship without fear. We will do everything we can to make that a reality.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I very much welcome the Home Secretary’s statement and the action he has taken on this very important matter. This issue is not just about buildings. People of faith live out their faith day in, day out in their homes and in their communities, so will he confirm that he will continue to do all he can to ensure we remain an open and tolerant society, and that the principles of freedom of faith, freedom of worship and freedom of speech will continue to be upheld for people of every faith?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He is right to highlight that this is not just about buildings—bricks and mortar—but the environment that people feel exists for them to practise and talk about their faith. The Prevent programme is there to safeguard young people against being drawn into extremism. There are a number of groups that both my Department and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government work with to try to create the all-important environment that gives people the freedom and security to practise their faith, no matter what that faith is.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I join him and the shadow Home Secretary in condemning the hate-filled attacks he referred to. I echo what they both said about the sanctity of places of worship. Everybody should be able to practise and observe their religion without fear. Any sensible measure that will help to make that happen is to be welcomed. Listening to what our religious communities need is paramount, so I welcome in particular what he said about consultation. It is a tragedy that we are having to have this discussion on how to protect places of worship in 2019. One reason we are having to do so is that online space has been ruthlessly exploited by those who would peddle hate and encourage such attacks.

The SNP welcomes the fact that the Government have published a White Paper on online harms, but we cannot wait for legislative reform. It seems that we are still struggling to come up with a complete and co-ordinated response that addresses how to police online hate. It is a question partly of resourcing, partly of improving co-ordination—but internationally and among the police forces of the United Kingdom—and partly of drawing on expertise. Does the Home Secretary accept that we need more of all those things?

The ongoing review of the Prevent strategy is much needed. Some of what happens through the strategy is effective, but more can be done to build community trust and increase the strategy’s effectiveness. One criticism that has been made is that the strategy has never been fully tailored to addressing the dangers posed by the far right. Can the Home Secretary assure me that all the expertise and knowledge available are being fully exploited so that strategies to tackle the far right are having the maximum possible impact?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of online space and how to ensure that we do all we can to stop online platforms being used to preach hate. I am glad that he welcomes our White Paper, which I think is fair to say is groundbreaking among all countries with respect to taking action—many countries are looking at how we are planning to handle the issue. The duty of care will make a difference.
The hon. Gentleman is also right to make the point that we cannot wait. Naturally, the consultation and legislation will take time, but it is good to see that some social media companies are already responding. I met several of them with fellow G7 Interior Ministers just last month, and they have pledged to take further action after the attack in Christchurch. That is good to see; I encourage them to do all they can now instead of waiting for legislation.

We are pleased to be having a review of the Prevent programme, because such independent reviews can help to build community confidence. It is also important for the review to look at how to stop far-right extremism; I can tell the hon. Gentleman that last year almost a quarter of Prevent programme referrals related to far-right extremism.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for his commitment to the security of places of worship. Will he join me in thanking our police and security services? They are the ones who work day in, day out to prevent attacks and we owe them a great deal. In other countries, police and security services are often used to clamp down on religious freedom; in our country, they are there to uphold it—and they do.

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in commending our police and security services for their invaluable work. We must remember just how many lives they have saved. It is already public knowledge that since the beginning of 2017, they have prevented or foiled 17 terrorist attacks, including four by the far right, that would almost certainly have led to loss of life. We owe a great debt to our security services and police.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement and for his reassurance at the time of Ramadan and at a time when we have seen such awful attacks on churches, mosques and synagogues around the world. He is right to be very clear that no one should ever be in fear as a result of following their faith.

Will the Home Secretary clarify whether the funding that he announced today is a further development from the announcements in March? Will he say what is being done to address online radicalisation and online religious hate crimes? The Select Committee on Home Affairs has heard some very concerning evidence about those matters, both in our private session this afternoon and in public sessions over previous weeks. In particular, what action is he aware of to tackle the closed Facebook groups that still have huge numbers of members and about which there are real concerns that religious hate crimes are being pursued?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. She asks whether the funding is new; further to what was announced soon after the atrocity in Christchurch. The £1.6 million for places of worship is not new, although there is more detail available on it today; I also announced the £5 million for training at the time. What is new today is the Ramadan package.

Like other colleagues, the right hon. Lady expressed her concern about how online platforms are being used. In particular, she mentioned Facebook. When legislation is in place, it will naturally be easier to take action. However, as I have said, there is action that online platforms can take today, including on closed groups, which has been welcomed by our international partners. There has been a welcome increase in engagement, but I do not feel that it has been enough. I think more can be achieved by working with our international partners, who are taking this matter seriously.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I welcome the statement. The Home Secretary will be unsurprised to learn that I welcome the Ramadan package, as I was one of over 90 colleagues who wrote on behalf of our mosques to ask for extra protection during the holy month. I very much appreciate the announcement.

As the Secretary of State for Education is on the Treasury Bench, may I also raise the concerns that my constituents have expressed about safety around schools? In particular, Muslim mothers in traditional dress are highly visible as they collect or drop off children and are often vulnerable to abuse and hate attacks. Will the Home Secretary work with his colleague to advise and support schools to ensure that children and parents are safe whenever they attend school premises?

Sajid Javid: I support what the hon. Lady said about the Ramadan package and the work that she has done with her community and others to raise the issue. She is also right to raise the issue of schools. I mentioned in my statement that there is £14 million of support for the Jewish community, as there should be. Most of that is for Jewish schools. It is right that we take a fresh look at other schools and religious establishments where people of certain faiths gather. Schools and community centres would be included in that. I have asked my officials for further advice to make sure that we look at this issue again in the light of the recent terrorist attacks that we have seen internationally. I know that the Secretary of State for Education shares my determination to make sure that we are doing all that we can by working together.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary strongly for his statement, especially in the light of the horrific attacks on mosques in Christchurch, churches across Sri Lanka and the synagogue in San Diego. I strongly welcome his words on hate crime, on which we need to take more action. Will he confirm for the House that all faith communities across the UK will be eligible to apply for this package of funding and support? Will account be taken of specific threats against particular communities, such as the Jewish community or the Ahmadi Muslim community, when applications are made?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can confirm all those points for the right hon. Gentleman. On the places of worship scheme, the £5 million for security training is available to all faiths. I encourage any faith group or organisation that feels that that could help to apply. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned different parts of the Muslim community. We want to make sure that we consult all different viewpoints in each faith and take their concerns into account.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I too welcome the Home Secretary’s statement. I align myself with his words and those of the shadow Home Secretary against the murderous, vile, horrific, cowardly attacks against
our faith communities. The thoughts and prayers of Members of this House continue to be with those who tragically lost their lives—men, women and children.

I want clarity on the Ramadan package in particular. As the Home Secretary knows, the holy month of Ramadan has begun. Many Muslims watching this statement will naturally be very anxious about the security of their mosques and other places during this holy month. Given that we only have a matter of days, how will the Ramadan package work in practice? How quickly will the money and security be available to those faith places?

**Sajid Javid:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s comments. On the Ramadan package in particular, we are working with an organisation called Faith Associates, which has experience in this area. It is planning to hold a series of workshops across England and Wales with firms and in the community, and is also working on guidance that will be issued to the 2,000 mosques, Muslim schools and community groups. That is the first part of the package, but we want to align it with the other parts of what I have announced today. If as a result of that engagement an organisation feels that it needs to apply for enhanced security, we will consider it as part of the places of worship scheme, and if it feels that it could benefit from the training package, we will consider that as well.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There is huge religious diversity in my constituency. Concern has been expressed not only about local incidents but, obviously, about the global terror incidents that we have seen. There has been some concern about the length of time between March and the availability of the new funding in July. Given what the Home Secretary has just said about the Ramadan package and given that we are already in the month of Ramadan, will he tell us whether any of those workshops have taken place yet, and whether, to his knowledge, that guidance has been distributed?

I remain deeply concerned about the neo-Nazi, extreme-right organisations that are targeting communities throughout the United Kingdom, especially Muslim and Jewish communities. Can the Home Secretary update me on the organisation System Resistance Network, which has been active in my south Wales constituency? It is simply an offshoot of National Action, and I have called for it to be proscribed.

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Gentleman has asked me specifically about the workshops in the Ramadan package, and about the guidance. If he will allow me, I will write to him, because I do not have the information to hand. As for the proscription of groups, whatever type of terrorism or extremism they preach, we take that incredibly seriously. The hon. Gentleman will know that ours was the first Government to proscribe a far-right organisation, National Action. If any proscribed organisation comes up with aliases or tries to get around the rules, we take that very seriously as well.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for what he has said this afternoon. I encourage all places of worship in my constituency, including churches and mosques, to access this money, but on Saturday we will have our third Big Iftar in the town square in Batley. What training would there be for a public event like that, and how swiftly could someone who applied for it gain access to it?

**Sajid Javid:** The £5 million training fund was announced in the week after the atrocity in Christchurch, and we are trying to make it available as soon as possible. During our early discussions with some members of the community, we talked about what would be the best way to use that fund, and how it should be focused. The hon. Lady asked me about a specific event that will take place very soon. I gathered that she would attend that event, or had been invited. I think it is great that Members of Parliament are supporting iftars around the country. I will check on whether the training will be available in time for the event in the hon. Lady’s constituency, and if she will allow me, I will write to her.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): The Home Secretary’s package is welcome, but he will know that the best way to prevent attacks is to ensure that we have strong, intelligence-led policing. What is his view of the capacity of police forces to engage further in the assessment of potential far-right and terrorist activity? In particular, will he look at the issue of closed Facebook groups, which was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)? In those groups, people continue to communicate with each other but the content cannot be seen by the police or the outside world, which can lead to attacks.

**Sajid Javid:** I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the issue of closed groups on social media—the more private groups—is being taken seriously, and is being looked at. He also asked about intelligence. As he will know, the gathering of intelligence on potential terrorist activities is led by Counter Terrorism Policing, a national policing command working with police forces across the country, together with the domestic Security Service. Its budget has been increased significantly over the last three to four years, and it remains an absolute priority to ensure that it has all the resources that it needs to gather that intelligence.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Change UK): The London Borough of Redbridge has one of the most diverse communities in the country, with gurdwaras, Hindu temples, mosques, Buddhist viharas and churches of all kinds. We also have a very active faith forum. Will the Home Secretary encourage his officials to do more to pursue a policy of interfaith dialogue and co-operation because, ultimately, it is through understanding and co-operation that we will deal with these problems?

**Sajid Javid:** I strongly agree. It is important to point out the work the hon. Gentleman does as the representative of the local community through the faith forum, and the work of organisations that both my Department and my former Department, the Communities Department, have supported. In my Department, the Building a Stronger Britain Together programme supports over 50 different projects across the country, many of which focus on promoting interfaith dialogue, which is incredibly important to stop hate crimes in future.
Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): How effective does the Home Secretary feel the Prevent strategy and the counter-terrorist strategy are?

Sajid Javid: The Prevent strategy is incredibly important for our counter-terrorism and counter-extremism work, but it is right that we periodically review it. The review of Prevent that is taking place now is important to learn lessons to see whether improvements can be made. But it also helps to build confidence in the whole strategy.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a practical, basic level, one of the most important ways of ensuring security is to make sure that places of worship are adequately staffed with people in positions of authority who can be alert to threats, so will the Secretary of State urgently review his decision to prevent ministers of religion from applying for tier 5 religious worker visas, which is already putting huge pressure on Christian churches and other faith communities ensuring that they have an adequate supply of cover for ministers over the summer?

Sajid Javid: We are absolutely right to have a visa route for religious workers, which is the hon. Gentleman has identified is the tier 5 route, and it is important for us to make sure that at all times it is working appropriately. I think it is. If the hon. Gentleman thinks improvements can be made, I will be happy to hear them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Four Members whose surnames begin with an S. I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I listened carefully to what the Home Secretary said. I am a former parliamentary church warden at St Margaret’s and a lay canon at Wakefield cathedral, and of course I know from recent reports that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world at the moment. I spoke to fellow worshippers at my church on Sunday. They were very concerned about security of religion and security of churches and meetings. Does the Secretary of State agree that we have a tradition of open churches and open mosques, with people wandering in and perhaps saying quiet prayers during the day, and open access? Can we make sure we get the balance right? When there was terrorism that pinpointed aircraft, there was an immediate reaction, and a great deal of money flowed into security and protection. I do not see the urgency in immediate reaction, and a great deal of money flowed into security and protection. I do not see the urgency in immediate reaction, and a great deal of money flowed into security and protection.

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of Christians who are being persecuted worldwide. That is why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was right to appoint the Bishop of Truro to look into this and report back to the House. There has been an interim report and there will be a full report later this year. The non-governmental organisation Open Doors estimates that there are almost 245 million persecuted Christians around the world, which shows the seriousness of this issue. The hon. Gentleman is also right to make the point about open churches and open mosques. In my own constituency I have seen churches that want to welcome anyone of any faith to come in and have a cup of tea and to meet people and members of the community. It is important that that is maintained. If it is not, the terrorists win. We must not let that happen.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I, too, would welcome clarity on the application criteria and on the allocation of funds. I know that Ramadan has only just started, but may I gently say to the Home Secretary that it would have been useful to know about the Ramadan fund prior to Ramadan? Finally, would he consider extending the criteria for the security fund to include such things as religious after-school clubs and madrassas, which are not covered by the existing criteria but could be equally vulnerable?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady makes some important suggestions. This is exactly why we have launched the consultation already. We have been talking to members of various faith groups and communities and listening to them to find out how we can ensure that the existing funds are well targeted and made as easy to access as possible, as well as to learn whether more needs to be done.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There is a shortage of dedicated prayer space for Muslim communities, especially in London, where land and buildings are expensive, and Friday prayers often take place in community buildings, which, by definition, are open and therefore more vulnerable. Will the money, the training and the workshops that the Home Secretary has talked about be available in those circumstances where there is no dedicated place of worship?

Sajid Javid: The whole point of this funding is to ensure that it works for the communities and faith groups that it is intended to help. It must be flexible enough to try to meet those needs. That is exactly why we are working with and consulting faith groups to ensure that those needs are met.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the commitment made by the Home Secretary. Hate crimes based on religion were at record levels last year, partly due to antisemitism and to Islamophobic incidents. While security is absolutely necessary, I believe that there is a need for a two-pronged approach, so can he tell the House what has been done to promote freedom of religious belief more generally, so that there would be no need for extra security at places of worship?

Sajid Javid: I think the hon. Gentleman speaks for every Member of this House, and I wish we did not have to have a statement like this today because none of us felt that we needed to provide protection for places of worship. Sadly, that is not the case and I know he agrees that we are absolutely right to focus on this. At the same time, we need to continue to ensure that our laws and regulations and the environment for religious worship are as strong as they can be, and I hope that today’s announcement will help to give reassurance to people of all faiths that, where protection is needed, it will be provided.
Timpson Review of School Exclusion

5.27 pm  

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):  
With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the publication of the Timpson review on school exclusions.

Last March, the Government commissioned Edward Timpson to explore how headteachers use exclusion and why some groups of pupils are more likely to be excluded than others. The review and the Government’s response are published today and I have placed copies in the House Libraries. The Timpson review is thorough and extensive, and I want to thank Edward and all those he worked with during the review, including schools, local authorities, parents, carers and children.

Exclusion rates have risen over recent years, but they are lower than they were a decade ago, and permanent exclusion—expulsion—remains a rare event: 85% of all mainstream schools did not expel any children in the academic year 2016-17. Edward Timpson’s review found excellent practice across the school system but also variation across different schools, local authorities and groups of children. The Government agree with Edward Timpson’s conclusion that there is no “right” level of exclusion that we should aim for, but we need to examine why there are differences in exclusion rates for pupils with different characteristics and in different places.

I want teachers to be free to teach and pupils to be free to learn in a safe and ordered environment, so I absolutely support headteachers when they conclude that they need to suspend a pupil in response to poor behaviour or to expel them as a last resort. But it is vital that we support schools to give pupils at risk of exclusion the best chance to succeed, and ensure that, for those children who are permanently excluded, this is also the start of something new and positive.

I am clear that, where exclusion is the right decision to take and someone is excluded from a school, they must be excluded from a school and not from education itself. That especially matters because excluded children include some of society’s most vulnerable and disadvantaged, with a third classed as children in need—that is, children known to social services.

Overall, when children from ethnic minorities are compared with white British children, there is no substantial difference in exclusion rates. The review found that children from some groups, such as black Caribbean children, are more likely to be excluded than white British children, while children from some other groups, such as Indian children, are less likely to be excluded.

The Government’s response to Timpson is based on four key commitments. First, we will always support headteachers to maintain a safe and orderly environment for pupils and staff. We will support schools to give pupils at risk of exclusion the best chance to succeed. We will make when and how it is appropriate for headteachers to remove children from their school much clearer and at the same time we will ensure sufficient oversight when they are. Finally, we will do more to support schools and alternative providers so that excluded pupils continue to receive a high-quality education.

To deliver that, the Government are today committing to the following actions. First, we will make schools accountable for the outcomes of permanently excluded children. We know that is complex and needs to be done in a way that is fair to schools and pupils, so we will work with education leaders over the summer to design a consultation to be launched in the autumn on how to deliver that in practice. As part of that consultation, we will also look at the implications of any changes to how alternative provision is commissioned and funded and at how we can mitigate the potential unintended consequences that Edward Timpson identified, including how to tackle the practice of so-called off-rolling. We will establish a practice programme to drive better partnership working between local authorities, schools, alternative provision and other partners, building on the excellent practice that Edward identified in his review. We will work with sector experts, led by the Department’s lead adviser on behaviour, Tom Bennett, to rewrite our guidance, including on exclusions, behaviour and discipline in schools, by summer next year.

We call on local authorities, governing bodies, academy trusts and local forums of schools to establish a shared understanding of the characteristics of children who leave schools by exclusion or otherwise. Our expectation is that that information will be used to inform improvements in practice and reduce disparities in the likelihood of exclusion between different groups of pupils.

We will work with Ofsted to define—that will give greater clarity for school leaders—and tackle the practice of off-rolling, where children are removed from school rolls without following formal exclusion procedures. That is often in ways that are in the interests of the school rather than the pupil. We believe the practice is relatively rare, but we are clear that, where it happens, it is unacceptable.

Finally, we will set out our plans for alternative provision this autumn, including more on how we will support alternative providers to attract and develop high-quality staff through a new alternative provision workforce programme and on how we will help commissioners and providers to identify and recognise good practice.

Before concluding, I want to address the issue of violent crime, in particular knife crime, which has tragically taken the lives of far too many of our young people. The issues surrounding serious violence, antisocial behaviour and absence and exclusion from school are complex, which is why we are working with the education and care sectors, the Home Office and other Departments as part of a comprehensive, multi-agency response. While exclusion is a marker for increased risk of being a victim or perpetrator of crime, we must be careful not to draw a simple causal link between exclusions and knife crime. There is no clear evidence to support that. I am clear, though, that engagement with and success in education are a protective factor for children. The measures outlined in our response to Timpson will play a key role in ensuring that every young person is safe and free to fulfil their potential away from violent crime.

I thank all colleagues on both sides of the House who have taken a close interest in this area. I mention in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and the other members of his Select Committee. I thank them for their work on this important issue, in particular their inquiry into alternative provision, which has helped to shape Government thinking. Most of all, I thank Edward Timpson and all those he worked with during the review. In taking forward our
response, we, like him, will take a consultative and collaborative approach to learn from those who carry out such valuable and often challenging work in teaching, supporting and caring for excluded children and those at risk of exclusion. I commend this statement to the House.

5.34 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I also thank Edward Timpson and everyone who contributed to the report.

No headteacher or school leader wants to exclude pupils, and this should be a power used as a last resort. As the report highlights, it is often the most vulnerable children who are excluded, and we must ensure that the right support is there. For some time I have urged the Secretary of State to match Labour’s proposals and ensure that there is proper responsibility for pupils who leave school rolls, and I am glad he has said he will accept that, along with all the review’s other recommendations.

I know there will be further consultation, but does the Secretary of State have a proposed approach to how and, critically, when schools will be accountable for the outcomes of excluded pupils? It took well over a year and several delays before today’s publication. Further consultation, however necessary it may be, cannot become an excuse for more foot dragging, so when will the consultation conclude and implementation begin?

I am also concerned that the report is limited only to permanently excluded children. Is there accountability for pupils who leave school rolls outside formal permanent exclusion? If not, surely there is a risk not only that this measure will fail to tackle off-rolling, but that it will make the perverse incentives that lead to it even worse, not better. I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement that the practice is unacceptable, unlawful and will be subject to a promised crackdown, but can he tell us how that will be achieved? What sanctions will be available to deter or prevent off-rolling?

The Secretary of State refers to Ofsted, but multi-academy trusts are not inspected, many schools go a decade with no inspection and Ofsted has suffered a 52% real-terms cut to its budget. Can it really tackle off-rolling under those constraints? His commitment to extend support for alternative provision is welcome, but will any additional funding be provided? What concrete measures will we see? The latest wave of free schools included just two that specialise in alternative provision, so how can he address the lack of services in some areas without allowing other schools to be built? Nor did he mention unregistered and unregulated alternative providers. Does he plan to take any further steps to enforce standards?

Let me ask the Secretary of State the obvious question that this review poses but fails to answer. Schools and all the other services that support the most vulnerable children are facing the worst cuts in a generation. The Secretary of State and the review dance around the impact of those cuts, but it is no good holding schools to account for obligations they do not have the resources to meet. Does he not accept that pupils are at greater risk of exclusion when support staff have been lost as a result of funding cuts? How can we implement early intervention when the very services that provide it are being stripped away? What guarantee can he give that the next spending review will give those schools and services the funding they need and deserve?

The aims of this review are shared on both sides of the House, as the Secretary of State mentions. I welcome the steps that have been taken, including the adoption of some of Labour’s proposals, but this cannot fall on schools alone. He mentions that a third of excluded pupils are known to children’s social services, so how can we consider this issue without considering the massive cuts? He talks about knife crime, yet safer schools can we consider this issue without considering the massive cuts? He talks about knife crime, yet safer schools...
The hon. Lady also asks about off-rolling and whether schools would be held to account for off-rolled pupils. Off-rolling is not legal. It should not be happening, and we need to make sure it does not happen. Some people say that there are shades of grey and it is not always clear what is allowable and what is not, so we will tighten up the guidance to make sure that there is far less room for interpretation and it is clear when it is allowable for a child to be moved out of school and when it is not. Through Ofsted, and the new framework, a spotlight will be shone on cases where it is believed that off-rolling may be taking place.

The hon. Lady talks about the gap between Ofsted inspections. Of course a number of different triggers can lead to an Ofsted inspection happening more quickly, and it is right that Ofsted has that range available to it.

I agree with the hon. Lady. That every child deserves an excellent education that fosters ambition and helps them to make the very most of their potential, whether they are in mainstream or AP. If they move from one to the other, what happens at that moment might make the biggest single difference to the entire rest of their lives.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome this review and pay tribute to Ed Timpson and to the Department. It was good news that the Department is welcoming his recommendations, many of which we suggested in the Education Committee report that the Secretary of State highlighted. I urge him to speed up the timescales of implementation. Given that the review says that those who are excluded can be identified, what more is he doing on early intervention to prevent those exclusions from happening in the first place? Finally, there is clearly a gap in post-16 alternative provision. Our Select Committee report recommended that resources be allocated for proper post-16 AP provision or outreach and support to colleges. What does he plan to do on those things?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is right about the distinction between pre-16 and post-16 provision. It is also true that, at 16, many children make a change in their place of learning—to a college or a further education college. There are also other types of setting to continue education or training. He asks about early intervention and was absolutely right to do so. There are, of course, many different types and many different stages of earliness of early intervention. What we are doing on exclusions is only one layer in a multi-layered approach to behaviour in schools. That starts with the very earliest type of interventions, which is early language, literacy and reading. If a child can access the curriculum and engage from an early age, it is much less likely that behaviour problems will start in the first place.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I welcome many of the recommendations made in the review—all eminently sensible recommendations. Of course young people do have a right to be educated in an environment that is conducive to good learning. Teachers also have a right to be able to work without fear or abuse. There are situations where the classroom environment becomes challenging for young people, but that does not mean that the young person should be prevented from accessing an education that is appropriate to their needs.

In Scotland, we are very proud of the work that we have done, and early exclusions have dropped by 59% since 2007. In 2016, just five young people were permanently excluded from the register, but achieving this drop has needed a lot of intervention and the use of things such as time-out rooms, pupil support and links to local Further Education colleges. In England, by contrast, the exclusion rates are increasing, and it is right that this should be dealt with. The Secretary of State said that 85% of schools do not permanently exclude, but that means that 15% do.

Off-rolling is passing on problems, and it must stop. We do not remove pupils from rolls in Scotland. They will continue to receive an education while excluded, either at school or at another location. Does the Secretary of State agree that, before any exclusion takes place, there should be an agreed plan put in place on what the next steps are for the particular child?

The Secretary of State talks about carrying weapons. Research by Edinburgh University shows that young people excluded from school are much more likely to end up in the criminal justice system or to be drawn to carrying weapons. Schools play a key role in protecting children from exploitation, so does he agree that joined-up work with challenging pupils alongside the police and social workers can have much better long-term benefit for the children than excluding them from the classroom?

Finally, does the Secretary of State agree that pupils with additional support needs, including those on the autistic spectrum, often need proper learning plans put in place, including resources and funding, to properly support them and ensure that they can continue to access mainstream education?

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. Of course I agree entirely with what she says about the need for appropriate support for children on the autistic spectrum or, indeed, for children with other special needs.

I acknowledge that Scotland has a very different approach to exclusions. I believe that the approach that we have in England is the right one, but it is right also that we have such reviews to make sure that exclusions are being used fairly and justly and are not affecting particular groups disproportionately.

The hon. Lady mentions the carrying of weapons and the fact that being in school is a protection against that. She is absolutely right about that, but it would be wrong to think that the sole or primary cause of a child not being in school is being excluded. Persistent absence is at least as big a deal.

Finally, I do recognise that the number of exclusions has come down very significantly in Scotland. The hon. Lady mentions that they are lower now than they were 10 years ago, but it is also true that exclusions in England are lower now than they were 10 years ago.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Alternative provision often takes too long to access and is a last resort, when in many cases it can be a positive experience for pupils and their families much earlier on. What can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State do to ensure swifter access to—and the removal of stigma from—alternative provision?

Damian Hinds: As my hon. Friend says, there is some fantastic alternative provision, some of which I have had the opportunity to see. The requirement to find a
place in alternative provision applies from day six, but the
guidance is clear that this should be done sooner where
possible, and from day one for children in the care system.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I
strongly welcome the publication of this review today,
even though it is slightly overdue. I can see where
Edward Timpson has held firm with the Government,
and perhaps some other areas that the Government
have asked him to water down slightly.

Damian Hinds indicated dissent.

Lucy Powell: Okay, the Secretary of State suggests
not. Let me put it a different way then. One area that I
feel could be strengthened is around the safety net and
the powers of local authorities to require schools to
keep children on their roll. The new guidance on managed
moves and the local authority’s powers to convene local
forums are welcome, but that will not be sufficient
where schools want to opt out of in-year fair access
protocols in their area.

Damian Hinds: I am very clear that the ultimate
decision to expel a child—a decision that is always
taken with a very heavy heart when it needs to happen,
after many other options have been looked at—is for
that headteacher and that school. However, we want
schools to work co-operatively, and there are some
great examples of that around the country, including at
both maintained schools and academies. Of course,
local authorities also play an important role in that
regard.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Off-rolling is often
just the start of a conveyor belt that leads to pupil
referral units, which too often are county lines recruiting
grounds and villain academies. What is the Secretary of
State going to do to ensure the rehabilitation is not just
lip service and that we enable all students to have a
second chance?

Damian Hinds: I totally agree. Rehabilitation is the
opportunity for a second chance. What happens in
alternative provision is an exceptionally pivotal moment
in a young person’s life, which is why the quality of that
provision is so important, as is attendance. As I have
said, AP is of a very high quality in the great majority
of cases.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford)
(Lab): I welcome the publication of this report, but I
am really worried by the number of families coming to
me because of real problems with their children not
gaining special educational needs support in schools.
The parents end up having to try to home school their
children instead, without the crucial support that they
need. There has been a 40% increase in the number of
permanent exclusions in my area in just a small number
of years, and I cannot see in the Secretary of State’s
statement the reassurance for those families that they
will get that SEN support by this time next year. What
will have changed in the next 12 months to bring the
number of exclusions down?

Damian Hinds: The right hon. Lady raises two different
issues that have some relationship to each other, but are
not the same subject. She is absolutely right that we
have to have the right support to provide a tailored and
fully enabling education for all children; our 2014 reforms
were possibly the most important for a generation in
that regard. Education, health and care plans are an
important step forward. More money is being spent on
high needs than used to be, but she is absolutely right
that we need to continue to strive to do better.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Headteachers across
the Wells constituency have shared with me their concerns
that although our local PRUs are excellent, they are
increasingly being funded by contributions from the
local schools to plug gaps left by reductions in the
county council’s budget. Will the Secretary of State
confirm that he will be speaking to the Chancellor and
the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and
Local Government to ensure that vital units such as
PRUs are funded properly across all interested agencies?

Damian Hinds: As I said earlier, the cost per place at
an alternative provision setting is considerably higher
than at a mainstream setting. That cost comes out of
high-needs budgets, on which there have been considerable
strains—from alternative provision, and in a bigger way
from special schools and SEN provision. That is one
reason why we were able to find an additional £250 million
over two years to help ease some of the strains on local
authority budgets.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I was the Minister
for behaviour and exclusions when the statistics show
that the figures started falling after 2007, and continued
to fall. I am afraid that those figures came down because
we actively pursued a policy—from the centre of
government—to reduce exclusions through behaviour
partnerships and of every child mattering. It needs
leadership from Ministers to do something about this
issue. Unless the Secretary of State really gets a grip on
this issue, the figures will continue to rise, as they
have done for the past few years, so will he commit to
making this issue a central priority, and direct schools
to be more responsible and work in partnership to
reduce unnecessary exclusions?

Damian Hinds: We do want to reduce unnecessary
exclusions. I noticed what the hon. Gentleman managed
to do there; he presided over this responsibility at a time
when the number of exclusions were higher than they
are today, and he has used that to say that the number
of exclusions were falling during that time. In the positive
spirit in which he meant his question, yes, of course I
agree that addressing the situation requires a concerted
effort at all levels and in all parts of the system, with the
Government, schools and, crucially, groups of schools
working together locally.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Staff at PRUs do a
vital job under often extremely difficult circumstances. I
do not know about other constituencies, but the PRU in
Stafford has for many years been housed in a completely
inadequate building that is located in totally the wrong
place. What can we do to ensure that staff and students
at PRUs have a place that is appropriate, and that will
hopefully enable students to go back to their mainstream
schools as soon as possible and not be diverted?
**Damian Hinds:** My hon. Friend is right to identify that it is people who make the difference. People make the difference in the whole education system, but particularly in this part of it. Leaders and individual teachers can inspire young people and turn their lives around. It is also important that there is the right environment. Some 42 alternative provision free schools are open, and there are a further 12 in the pipeline as part of our ongoing large commitment of capital to increase the number of overall places in the education system, and of course for condition funding.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I was a bit surprised to find out that the review was published on the same day as the Government response, because we have been waiting for the review for some time and it is my understanding that it is not normal practice for the Government response to be published on the same day. But it is nice to have the Government response because it seems as though they are now actually going to do something. The problem is that we urgently need to do something about off-rolling. Ministers have previously come to the Select Committee on Education and said that off-rolling is illegal, and the Secretary of State has reiterated that this afternoon. But it is still happening and Ofsted is still giving “good” judgments to schools that are off-rolling pupils. Off-rolling is bad and it is happening all too often—rarely by comparison to the whole cohort of children, but there are still tens of thousands of youngsters around the country who have been off-rolled. It needs to stop. The consequences are bad for the children themselves, who all too often get no education whatever, but the consequences for the communities that they live in could also be very serious, as we know that excluded and off-rolled children become embroiled in the criminal justice system.

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Gentleman is right. Off-rolling is wrong and should not be happening. There are different categories within off-rolling, and Ofsted will be looking at this issue in its new framework. There are two ways to look at the question of our response coming out on the same day as the report: a positive way and a negative way. I prefer to see it as a same-day service that demonstrates urgency.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s approach to the Timpson review and the clear action that he set out in respect of off-rolling, which is when children are pushed out of education. Will he also give some attention to the situation that occurs when the relationship breaks down between the school on the one hand and the parents and pupil on the other hand, which often leads to parents taking their children out of formal schooling, so they then often receive no education at all?

**Damian Hinds:** Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The relationship between families and schools is absolutely at the heart of education. Of course we want those relationships to be as strong as they can and for people on both sides to keep on working at them for the good of the child.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): One of the things in the report that I found particularly concerning was the talk of the children at multiple risk—at risk not just because they have special educational needs and disability but because they have SEND, they are from an ethnic minority background, and they are from a disadvantaged background. I fear that where we talk about the problem of exclusion, there could be a perverse incentive for schools to increase off-rolling and, even worse, to refuse to admit children with these characteristics in the first place. What powers can the Government give to local authorities to compel schools to accept children with these characteristics and to readmit children who have been off-rolled?

**Damian Hinds:** Of course, schools must have fair admissions policies, and that is absolutely right. It is also right that we at the Department for Education and local authorities, working together, need to make sure that the support is there for schools to be able to do their very best for the children concerned. The hon. Lady has my continued commitment to that.

**Ann Coffey** (Stockport) (Change UK): Edward Timpson’s report identifies that moving from primary to secondary school can be a difficult time for children, leading to a rise in exclusions during the transition period. Stockport has a programme that identifies children in primary school who need extra support at that time. Without this support, which includes working with families, schools and mentors, vulnerable children are likely to fail or be excluded. The lack of funding limits the number of children who can be helped. What extra funding will local authorities receive from the new practice improvement fund to help with the primary-to-secondary transition?

**Damian Hinds:** I do not know the specific answer on the practice improvement fund. There are parts of the country where we are looking at this if it is a long-standing issue. The primary-to-secondary-phase transition manifests itself in a number of different ways. It can be a very daunting prospect for a child moving sometimes from quite a small, manageable school where they know most people to the much bigger and, in some senses, scarier environment of secondary school. Summer learning loss is another feature of this. I will take care to look at the example in Stockport that the hon. Lady mentions.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Last year, an academy in my constituency temporarily excluded nearly a quarter of its pupils. That is over a third of all exclusions across Barnsley. The Minister said that there is no right level of exclusions, but surely he will agree that these figures are far too high. Can I push him again on what the Government are proposing to do to tackle excessive exclusions in our schools?

**Damian Hinds:** Most of my statement was a response to the hon. Lady’s question, or at least indirectly. There is no right level of exclusions to pursue, but obviously we would all like exclusions to be lower, because that means more children being in school in a stable education and not having to move elsewhere in the system. I do not know if she was trying to make a specific point in mentioning academies, but overall academies and local authority maintained schools have broadly the same rates.
Damian Hinds (Bury North) (Lab): I welcome this review by Timpson. It is very well considered and speaks home truths that the sector and many Members on both sides of the House have been trying to get this Government in front of and to pay attention to. I look forward to the implementation of the Government’s response published today. We know from the report, as we knew before its publication, that 20% of all those excluded were under the category of “other”. We also know that 80% of those excluded have special educational needs or are disabled learners. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State questions that. The figure is 44% on temporary exclusions and 46% on fixed, so cumulatively it is 80%—in fact, more than that. What will he be doing differently in following up the Government’s response to ensure that this is not just a report on how to exclude well but on how to design a system that is inclusive for learners in mainstream schools with special educational needs and disability? Some 80% to 90% of tribunals have found in favour of parents who take local authorities to court because they have been let down by SEND support in mainstream education. It is cheaper to do more a lot earlier.

Damian Hinds: The position on children with special educational needs and exclusion is a very important subject. It is quite a complex picture. Alongside today’s report, we have published some quite detailed analysis on the odds on different groups being excluded, when we control for other facts. As I say, it is quite a complex picture, and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to have a look at it. However, he is absolutely right that the early support we can give to children with special educational needs, which often means the support that is going on in a school, that sometimes means they are forgotten, rather than it being a trigger for intervention. In Walthamstow, over the past year, we as a community have been looking at mentoring in our schools, to try to work with some of these young people. Will the Secretary of State meet me and some of the community groups involved in that work, to see what we can learn from it and help to ensure that every child has a bright future within education?

Turning to my question, I ask the Secretary of State again: does he believe that schools and other support services have the funding they actually need to make these early interventions the norm for some of our most vulnerable pupils?

Damian Hinds: On the hon. Lady’s second point, I do recognise that funding is tight in schools—we have had discussions and debates about that in this House on a number of occasions—but there is also truly outstanding practice in our education system. We need to make sure that where outstanding practice exists, it can also be spread. On her first point, I am sorry—I did not know about the absence of a large-print version of the report and I will see to it that she is furnished with one.
Damian Hinds: That sounds like a very interesting programme. Of course I would be happy to do so, and I look forward to it.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): This is all about leadership. We need to know who is responsible and accountable at a local level for the education of all the young people, so that no one gets left at the edges. Will the Secretary of State look at ensuring that there is not only co-ordination but responsibility in behaviour partnerships or the local authority, so that intervention takes place, to tackle this issue once and for all?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is right—I am not surprised; he is often right about these things—about the importance of collaboration and co-operative working. There are great examples around the country of that happening between different types of school. It is not usually about the formal management structure; it is about everybody seeing the shared interest and working together, and that is what we encourage people to do.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Youth work offers young people the opportunity to access education in an informal environment. We know that good youth work and strong youth workers can support young people and their families to engage with schools and teachers, in order to prevent exclusions, but we have lost 3,500 youth workers since 2010, and more than 800 youth centres have closed—the system is creaking. What commitment can the Secretary of State make to look at working with the youth work sector in order to support the education sector and some of the most vulnerable young people in our communities?

Damian Hinds: I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of different agencies—different parts of the public, private and voluntary sectors—working together on this, and that includes youth work. Some very good programmes are run in different parts of the country, and generally speaking people find that partnership working pays off.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I share concerns raised by Members about exclusions and illegal off-rolling, but schools make use of other tools and practices to remove children—particularly SEN children—from classes, such as isolation booths. Those booths are barbaric, leaving children in what is essentially solitary confinement for the school day. I have even heard stories of children being placed in these booths due to poverty-related incidents, such as wearing the wrong shoes for the day. That is quite simply unacceptable. What is the Secretary of State doing to address the serious issue of isolation booths?

Damian Hinds: It is right that schools set their behaviour policies, but of course those have to be reasonable, and that is what we expect throughout the system. We have guidance on these things, and as part of the response to this report I have committed to update the guidance on a range of matters relating to exclusions and behaviour, including that one. That is not to say that the use of isolation as a punishment and a deterrent is wrong in all cases. When people use that term, it does not mean the same thing in all schools, and what the hon. Gentleman describes is not necessarily what we find in other places.

Vera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I think all Members across the House recognise that many of these excluded young people are the most vulnerable, but we should also recognise that a lot of them are deeply traumatised. Will he look into the excellent work of the Trauma Recovery Centre in Bath, engage with the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences and look at whether all schools in England can become trauma informed?

Damian Hinds: Yes. The recognition of childhood trauma is incredibly important. There is a very heavy overlap between children in need who are known to social services and those exposed to childhood trauma. We know that that group is more likely to be excluded, so I welcome what the hon. Lady says and the focus that her group brings to the issue.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): In order to learn lessons, will the Secretary of State publish a list of the 47 schools with in excess of 10 expulsions a year? Given the fact that off-rolling is a huge issue, will he also publish the list of 300 schools with “particularly high levels” of pupil movement? What action are the Government taking to deal with the increasing issue of off-rolling or children who are missing from the system? Many Members have raised concerns. What extra resources are available to back up these recommendations?

Finally, how will he continue to update the House? It needs to be regularly. We have waited since before Christmas for the Timpson review, and we cannot have delays like that again for updates.

Damian Hinds: I will be happy to continue to update the hon. Lady. We have Education questions regularly, and there are other opportunities to be kept updated. She asked about the publication of lists. This report was a major piece of work to find out the reality of practice and how it varies in different places for different groups of children. It is a very valuable piece of work for that reason.

On the hon. Lady’s point about the small number of schools with a large number of exclusions, it is necessary to remember that that might be in one year, and in other years the school is not in that position. Sometimes it is because a school has a particularly troubled set of circumstances—a new headteacher comes in, or there is a change, and various measures have to be taken. As I say, I think all of us would like to see the number of exclusions be lower rather than higher, but that is not to say that there is never a role for exclusion.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): This afternoon, the Secretary of State has admitted that he knows school funding is tight and that the earlier we intervene with children who have special educational needs, the better. I agree with him. I am fed up of schools in my constituency telling me about the impact of real-terms cuts to their budgets, which tend to hit specialist services the most. Will the Secretary of State finally commit to reverse those real-terms funding cuts and stick to his word, to ensure that children with special educational needs get the support they need at an early stage?

Damian Hinds: I do say, as I said earlier, that funding is tight in schools, and managing school budgets can be challenging. It is also true that we are holding real-terms
per pupil funding constant at the macro level. It is also true that, internationally, we have relatively high state spending at primary and secondary level. It is also true that the high-needs budget has risen from £5 billion to more than £6 billion. All those things are true simultaneously. There has been more money going in, but it is very difficult. There have been specific cost pressures for schools. I recognise that, and the hon. Lady has my continued commitment to ensure that we get the right level of resourcing that we need for an excellent education for everyone.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is reported that Gloucestershire has the highest level of exclusions in the south-west. The one thing that is missing from this very good report is any quantitative evidence. It would be useful to know that the Secretary of State is prepared to look at the differences between not only schools but local authority areas, to ensure that we bear down on areas that do not seem to have an appropriate strategy.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman has my commitment on that. We have looked, and Edward has looked in his analysis, at not only the differences between schools within an area but the differences between local authority areas, at different levels of geography and in different segmentations and typologies.

Banking (Consumer and Small Business Protection)

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

6.19 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I beg to move, that leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to enable consumers to transfer mortgages between providers; to prohibit the sale of mortgage debt to unregulated entities and the foreclosure of certain loans; to establish financial services tribunals; and for connected purposes.

This Bill makes provision for a new covenant to deliver a fairer deal for borrowers. It seeks first to free the mortgage prisoners, secondly to protect small business borrowers, and thirdly to make provision for a new financial services tribunal.

First, who are the mortgage prisoners? They are people who are trapped by changes in mortgage regulation. They are trapped in expensive mortgages and unable to remortgage to get a better deal. The rules say that they cannot afford payments on a mortgage at, say, 2% so they are forced to continue with a mortgage paying 5% or more. It is a crazy situation. It is estimated that there are up to 200,000 mortgage prisoners in the UK today. Every one of these 200,000 families has a story of how they have struggled to get by, struggled to meet expensive payments to keep a roof over their heads.

One of those is Charlotte’s family. Charlotte is 39 years old. She and her husband live in the west midlands. They took out a Northern Rock mortgage in 2007. In 2010 she had twins who suffer from serious disabilities: both are wheelchair bound. Charlotte and her husband have never missed a single mortgage payment, but they cannot remortgage because of the regulators’ affordability test. She says:

“How can we not afford to pay less?”

Why does that matter to Charlotte and her family? She says that with a new mortgage they could pay so much less, and afford more therapies for their sick children, rather than having to fundraise.

Charlotte is far from alone. Mr and Mrs Adams live in Bournemouth in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). They took out a Northern Rock mortgage in 2007. In 2010 they had twins who suffer from serious disabilities: both are wheelchair bound. Charlotte and her husband have never missed a single mortgage payment, but they cannot remortgage because of the regulators’ affordability test. She says:

“How can we not afford to pay less?”

Why does that matter to Charlotte and her family? She says that with a new mortgage they could pay so much less, and afford more therapies for their sick children, rather than having to fundraise.

Charlotte is far from alone. Mr and Mrs Adams live in Bournemouth in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). They took out a Northern Rock mortgage in 2007. In 2010 they had twins who suffer from serious disabilities: both are wheelchair bound. Charlotte and her husband have never missed a single mortgage payment, but they cannot remortgage because of the regulators’ affordability test. She says:

“How can we not afford to pay less?”

Why does that matter to Charlotte and her family? She says that with a new mortgage they could pay so much less, and afford more therapies for their sick children, rather than having to fundraise.

Charlotte is far from alone. Mr and Mrs Adams live in Bournemouth in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). They took out a Northern Rock mortgage in 2007. In 2010 they had twins who suffer from serious disabilities: both are wheelchair bound. Charlotte and her husband have never missed a single mortgage payment, but they cannot remortgage because of the regulators’ affordability test. She says:

“How can we not afford to pay less?”

Why does that matter to Charlotte and her family? She says that with a new mortgage they could pay so much less, and afford more therapies for their sick children, rather than having to fundraise.
cannot go elsewhere because she is self-employed. Her income fluctuates, meaning that she fails the “affordability” test to be able to get a new mortgage with lower payments, even though she has made all her mortgage payments and the loan to value is just 50%. Her mortgage is costing some £4,000 more a year than it would if she was not a mortgage prisoner.

These cases highlight the plight of Britain’s mortgage prisoners. The Government should be lending a helping hand, not a tin ear. The Treasury should not be selling mortgages off to vulture funds like Cerberus without protection. The regulators should be doing their bit to help free the mortgage prisoners, too. There has been some change. The Financial Conduct Authority launched a consultation in March. It proposes changing the affordability test for consumers who are up to date with their payments. That sounds good, but there is a big shortcoming. The proposals outlined give lenders the option, they do not introduce the obligation.

It is also welcome that in July last year, UK Finance—the banks’ trade association—launched a voluntary agreement, in which lenders committed to support existing mortgage prisoners to switch to an alternative product at their present lender. But that does not help people switch from vulture funds, and it does not help Mr and Mrs Adams escape from TSB’s Whistletree fund, because TSB claims that they are not its customers, even though Whistletree’s own website describes it as a “trading name of TSB Bank plc”.

I hope that TSB will reconsider.

How does this Bill seek to set free the mortgage prisoners? These mortgages were taken out many years ago—2007 and before, so well before the post-crash affordability rules and other regulatory changes came in. Yet these borrowers have proved their ability to pay for over a decade by making their mortgage payments. Why have a computer-driven affordability test that ignores the reality of the real world? We have to move past “computer says no” to “reality says yes”. These borrowers should be treated as grandfathered as regards the later regulatory rules that came in. Banks should be obliged by the FCA to take people on and treat them as grandfathered, whether they are existing customers or not, and the new mortgages should be permitted without any regulatory penalty for the bank they move to.

The Treasury needs to take responsibility, too. The Treasury has been selling Northern Rock’s loan book to funds like Cerberus. When selling these books, they should make sure that there are protections so that borrowers do not lose out. It is wrong for the Treasury to have allowed borrowers to be placed in a worse position than would otherwise have been the case.

There needs to be a fairer deal for business borrowers as well. Business loans above £25,000 are unregulated. Time and again, we have seen the results of this—RBS’s Global Restructuring Group unit, Lloyds’ Business Support Unit and the practices of funds like Cerberus. Small businesses are the lifeblood and job creators of our economy. We need to see them treated fairly, so that they can focus on what they do best—creating jobs and making our country more successful.

The all-party parliamentary group for fair business banking and finance, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), has campaigned tirelessly to secure a fairer deal for business borrowers. And it is badly needed because one would think that, when small businesses are making their loan payments, they must be untouchable. Yet it is all too easy to seize on a technical loan condition breach to pull the plug and foreclose. Perfectly viable, successful businesses are wrongly ended in this way. Not only are jobs lost, but the business owners all too often lose their homes and go personally bankrupt. It means that we lose entrepreneurs. Every time a small business closes, part of our economy dies.

How does this Bill protect small business borrowers? First, it would ban the practice of seizing on loan conditions. The rule should be that if a small business is paying, the lender cannot pull the plug, but it is not just about foreclosure on a technicality. There should be a greater rebalancing for small businesses to take on big banks that are trying to take advantage of them. That is why there needs to be a new financial services tribunal. Most small business borrowers cannot go to the Financial Ombudsman Service. They are too small to be able to afford expensive court battles. A new financial services tribunal would fill the gap. It is welcome that the ombudsman’s remit has been extended, yet this is not a solution as redress is limited. Moreover, unregulated entities like Cerberus are not covered. That is why we need a financial services tribunal to protect small business borrowers.

Capitalism is vital to the success of our economy and a cornerstone of our way of life. Yet as Conservatives we know that capitalism must be tempered by responsibility and fairness. We want people to work hard and to be able to enjoy success, yet we will not tolerate people being taken advantage of. That is the policy of this Bill—a Bill that seeks to set free the mortgage prisoners, to protect small business borrowers who are meeting their loan payments from foreclosure, and to make provision for a new financial services tribunal to ensure greater protection for small business. This is a Bill that seeks to forge a new covenant to deliver greater fairness for borrowers.

Question put and agreed to. Ordered.
That Charlie Elphicke, Kevin Hollinrake, Holly Lynch, Stewart Hosie, Nicky Morgan, John Mann, David Simpson, Mr Steve Baker, Wes Streeting, Mr Simon Clarke, John Spellar and Mr Paul Sweeney present the Bill.
Charlie Elphicke accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 387).
Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill

Second Reading

6.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill delivers an important part of the work that the Government are doing to protect animals, both in the wild and in captivity, and to ensure that we as a country maintain our world leadership on safeguarding and respecting animals. This important Bill seeks to bring to an end outdated practices that have no place in modern society and delivers a long held Government commitment. It addresses the specific concerns of the public and Parliament about the use of wild animals in travelling circuses and seeks to bring that activity to an end. That requires primary legislation, for reasons that I will explain in a moment.

The Government published the draft Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny in April 2013. I pay tribute to Members who have taken the Bill forward as private Members' Bills. First, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who is in his place, picked up the Bill at the end of the 2010 to 2015 Parliament. Then my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) attempted to take the Bill forward during the last Parliament. Last, but by no means least, during this Session my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who is in her place, really sought to give the Bill wings. Sadly, those attempts were not successful, for reasons that I will not go into here, but I thank those Members for their efforts.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who, I am pleased to see, is also in his place. His Backbench Business debate back in June 2011 put this issue firmly on the Government's agenda and made it clear what Parliament was specifically concerned about.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister is setting out the history—the long time it has taken to get the Bill to this point. Although I very much welcome the fact that it is here, it is very overdue. Will he confirm that the Bill will come into force in January 2020? Will he confirm that the Bill has not finished its progress through Parliament—the long time it has taken to delivering on this legislation.

David Rutley: I completely agree. We are working hard to find the right vehicle to take that important legislation forward. I am just delighted that today we are taking forward action on wild animals and circuses.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I support this Bill, but will the Minister confirm that nothing in it should cause any animal affected by it to be put down?

David Rutley: I completely understand my right hon. Friend's concern. We have had conversations with circus owners, who certainly have no such intentions whatever—they regard these animals as part of their families. The issue is that the practice is outdated and society has moved on; it is not appropriate for such performances and exhibitions to take place. We will explain later, circus owners will still be able to own the animals and look after them, but they will have to seek licences and will be inspected.

Many Members on both sides of the House have spoken passionately about this issue. Time prevents me from naming them all, but we recognise the concerns and I am pleased that we are able to take action today. I am delighted that there is strong support across the Chamber today. I will, of course, talk about the important work that took place under the previous Labour Government. I am delighted at the degree of co-operation. Of course we understand that there will be challenges, but we are grateful for the co-operation, which will ensure a smooth passage for this legislation.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): We were promised that the Bill would come in after the Backbench Business debate secured by the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). One of the reasons subsequently given by the Government for not introducing it was that the European Union would not allow us to—there is a stream of responses to my written parliamentary questions on the subject that told me that. However, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Scotland, Slovenia and Slovakia have all introduced a ban. Will the Minister put on the record that that line that we were given—that we could not introduce a ban because we were in the EU—was just not true?

David Rutley: I was not around at the time of whatever was said. I have been involved for eight months and we have been working closely together on a wide range of activities. We are trying to get this legislation through at pace. I pay tribute to the work that has gone on in Scotland since we declared that there would be a commitment to introducing this ban. The ban has been introduced there and we are pleased that there has been support for what we are doing today from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and the Scottish Government.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister was not around at the time and cannot be held responsible, but the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is absolutely right. France is another member of the European Union that has introduced a ban.

I welcome the Second Reading of this Bill in the House of Commons. It has taken some time, perhaps longer than it should have, but I am grateful that the
Government have brought it forward. I have two quick questions. Will the Minister give a commitment that the timetable for introduction will not slip beyond next January? Secondly, does he believe the Bill is tough enough on enforcement?

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for those questions and again acknowledge his work and tireless commitment on this issue. I remember him discussing the issue at length and in depth.

No, the timetable will not slip. Obviously, what was said when we made the commitment to bring the legislation into place was that there would be interim regulations involving licences. There was a sunset clause on those, and we will get the legislation in place so that there is no gap. There have been questions about that matter previously.

On enforcement, this Bill, as I will explain, is based primarily on ethics rather than welfare concerns. It does not have some of the enforcement powers that some people have talked about. However, it is important to note that other legislation is in place—not least the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and legislation from 1976—that will enable us to have those enforcement powers. This Bill complements that: the legislation works together to provide the enforcement mechanisms that my hon. Friend is seeking.

When we first announced in March 2012 that we would introduce a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses, the Government were clear that primary legislation would take time. As I have said, we introduced interim measures—welfare licensing regulations. Those regulations will expire in 2020 and the Government have announced that they will not be renewed. That is why this Bill is being introduced: so that we can deliver with confidence on that commitment.

It might help if I provide a bit of historical context, to put the timeframes into perspective.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): That will have to be long!

David Rutley: Given all the statutory instruments of recent months, I am used to this sort of barracking and harassment from the other side, but I take it in the intended spirit.

The subject matter itself has long been a source of debate: the issue was considered by a parliamentary Select Committee between 1921 and 1922, which resulted in the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act 1925. No Members in the House today were around at that time. As hon. Members may be aware, this Government replaced that Act when we introduced the Animal Welfare (Licensing and Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018. Since the 1925 Act was introduced, debates and motions in Parliament on animals in circuses have been commonplace.

As I said, it is important to recognise the work undertaken by the previous Labour Government. During the debates on the Animal Welfare Bill in 2006, the then Government agreed to look at the issue in order to bring forward a ban on the use of certain wild species in travelling circuses using the delegated powers provided in the Animal Welfare Act 2006, subject to there being sufficient scientific evidence to support it. To assess that evidence, the academic lawyer Mike Radford was appointed to chair a circus working group. His report, the Radford report, concluded that there were no welfare concerns over and above animals kept in other captive environments. Therefore, any attempt to take forward a ban on welfare grounds under the Animal Welfare Act would fail the test of proportionality and primary legislation would be needed.

Following the report, a feasibility study was undertaken during 2008 to assess whether regulations were appropriate. The study concluded that a regulatory regime could be devised and implemented. The previous Government issued a public consultation in December 2009 on how best to protect wild animals in travelling circuses and about 95% of respondents supported a complete ban.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that the British Veterinary Association concluded:

“The welfare needs of non-domesticated, wild animals cannot be met within a travelling circus—in terms of housing or being able to express normal behaviour”?

Does he agree with the evidence brought forward by the BVA?

David Rutley: We have worked closely with the BVA and I am really pleased that it has welcomed the steps we have taken. I agree that it has put forward some compelling arguments and I am pleased it recognises we are able to deliver on them. Again, we are seeing collaborative working relationships across Parliament with the welfare groups to get the proposed legislation through. It has taken time—more time than any of us would have liked—but it is now moving forward.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister said that 95% of people responded to the previous Government’s consultation. What does that mean in numbers, so the House can have a good idea of how many people were actually consulted?

David Rutley: That is a fantastic question—a terrific question—which I know the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), with her encyclopaedic knowledge, will be answering in a little time. It will be worth waiting for. I know the hon. Gentleman asked me the question, but we will get that answer in just a little while. Joking aside, the important point was that 95% of respondents wanted the ban. That is the key point. Society has moved on and this is not appropriate activity.

In terms of the next milestone, I have already talked about the important Backbench Business that was put through unopposed by my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin, calling on the Government to introduce a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. In response, in March 2012, the Government announced they would pursue a ban, with licensing regulations introduced as a temporary measure. In April 2013, the Government published the draft Wild Animals in Circuses Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny, leading to subsequent attempts, by the hon. Members mentioned in my introduction, to introduce the Bill via the private Members’ Bill route.

There are now only 19 wild animals left in travelling circuses. That is a low number, but the BVA captured the importance of the Bill when it said that a ban is emblematic of how we should be treating animals in the modern world.
Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): There are two circuses, Circus Mondao and Peter Jolly’s Circus, with the 19 animals. Is the Minister going to ensure the welfare of those animals is secured after they have been released from performing? They are not wild animals or domestic animals. They will need to be well looked after.

David Rutley: As defined in this Bill, they are wild animals, but I understand my hon. Friend’s point. As I tried to make clear earlier, their welfare absolutely will be looked after. We have had assurances of that from the circuses themselves and we have legislation in place that will ensure that there are ongoing inspections to make sure that their welfare is looked after. I hope that reassures my hon. Friend. I recognise his interest as the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the important work the Committee has done on this issue and across a wide range of other activities on animal welfare. I am grateful to him for that.

Mark Pritchard: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous. A lot of people across the House have supported me over the years—the Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats and so on. This is a tribute to them all. He mentions the Animal Welfare Bill under the previous Labour Government. I remember working with colleagues across the House on that. Is it not time for the Government, however grateful I am for the introduction of this Bill, to introduce a comprehensive animal welfare Bill of their own, which incorporates so many other private Members’ Bills that have been discussed in this House over the past few years, rather than take a piecemeal approach? Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, for plugging my own private Members’ Bills, but there are three I could name: the Protection of Common Birds Bill, the Sale of Primates as Pets (Prohibition) Bill and the Sale of Endangered Animals on the Internet Bill. Those are just three Bills from one lowly Conservative Back Bencher. Many other important animal welfare thoughts, ideas, policies and Bills have been introduced over the past few years. Will the Government seriously consider a comprehensive Bill to modernise animal welfare once and for all?

David Rutley: That is another important question. There is a strong rationale to do that. We are looking at other proposed legislation going forward. The environment Bill will be absolutely pivotal in the next Session, but as my hon. Friend knows we have other legislation we need to get through. We all know, including those on the Opposition Benches, that there is a lot of other proposed legislation that will take up time and make matters more complicated. However, he makes a good point and it is vital we seek ways to get other Bills in place, not least on animal sentience. We have already had a question about sentencing and increased sentences. I share the commitment to seeing that proposed legislation through. We just need to find the right vehicle to do that.

There are key arguments about necessity. It is not necessary to use wild animals to operate a circus or to enjoy the circus experience. The public can still, as the vast majority already do, attend travelling circuses that do not use wild animals. They can also readily see wild animals in zoos and safari parks. We need to consider the intrinsic value of wild animals. Modern society recognises the intrinsic value of these animals. This concerns the respect of animals and their natural behaviour. Wild animals in a circus are trained for our entertainment and amusement. That sends the wrong message to audiences about the intrinsic value of those animals. We should appreciate wild animals behaving naturally, not in a comic or superficial setting. We need to look at the educational conservation benefits. The practice of using wild animals in circus performances, unlike in zoos, does nothing to further our understanding or the conservation of wild animals. There is no greater benefit to humans or animals that justifies the use of wild animals in circuses. In short, it is an outdated practice that is no longer necessary to operate a circus or to enjoy the circus experience, and it is demeaning to the wild animals involved.

In 1990, 29 years ago, there were over 250 wild animals across some 20 circuses, including tigers, lions, elephants and bears. By the time of the 2009 DEFRA consultation, it was estimated that there were only four circuses in the UK using some 47 wild animals. Today, there are only 19 wild animals left and only two travelling circuses. Attitudes and audience appetites have changed, but if we fail to bring in a ban by the time our licensing regulations expire in January there is a risk that we could see more travelling circuses using wild animals, such as lions and tigers again. It is crucial that we do not let that happen.

Let me turn to the Bill itself. Clause 1, the main clause, will make it an offence for a circus operator to use a wild animal in a travelling circus in England. The offence applies only to operators of travelling circuses in the circus environment; our view is that most people are employees or hired acts who are firmly in the control of the operator, so it should be the operator who carries responsibility for any illegal use of a wild animal.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister look again at the need to define “travelling circus” in the Bill? A concern exists that without such a definition, the law will be unclear on circuses that travel without actually showing the animals. Many animal welfare organisations think that it would be much clearer if the Bill included a definition of “travelling circus”.

David Rutley: I understand that some residual concerns have been raised by welfare groups, but I assure the hon. Lady that the definition set out will be adequate. In fact, the Scottish Government arrived at a very similar definition.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Minister says that he believes that the definition is adequate, but surely he will concede that such matters can be explored and tested in Committee. If it can be demonstrated that the definition is not as clear as it ought to be, will the Government be open to amending the Bill before Third Reading?

David Rutley: Of course, in Committee, we will have the chance to review these things in more detail. There has been ongoing discussion with Opposition Front Benchers about the Committee process.

Clause 1(2) defines “use” as either performance or exhibition. It should cover circumstances in which wild animals are put on display at the circus, usually just
adjacent to the big top, as well as performances in the ring. The penalty for a circus operator who is found guilty of using a wild animal in a travelling circus is an unlimited fine; the Animal Welfare Act 2006 also provides powers to seize animals where there are grounds to do so.

Subsection (4) provides for corporate liability where the circus operator is a corporate entity. Subsection (5) sets out definitions of terms used throughout clause 1, including “wild animal”—a term that is well understood and has already been defined in other legislation such as the Zoo Licensing Act 1981 and the Welfare of Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (England) Regulations 2012. We have largely replicated that approach in the Bill:

“wild animal means an animal of a kind which is not commonly domesticated in Great Britain”.

To meet that definition, an animal does not have to have been born in the wild. Most of the wild animals currently in English circuses have been bred in captivity, usually from several generations of circus animals, but that does not make them domesticated. Domestication is a process that happens over many generations—hundreds of years, if not thousands.

To return to a question asked by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), clause 1 does not define “travelling circus”. The term is left to take its common meaning, which we believe the courts will have no trouble in interpreting. Indeed, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s July 2013 report on the draft Bill agreed that we did not need to include a definition of the term; nor was a circus itself defined by the Scottish Parliament in the Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (Scotland) Act 2018. Defining a circus in a specific way might be unhelpful, because it could provide parameters for an operator to seek to evade the ban.

The common meaning of “circus” is “a company of performers who put on shows with diverse entertainments, often of a daring or exciting nature, that may include, for example, acts such as...acrobats, trapeze acts...tightrope walkers, jugglers, unicyclists”.

The role of wild animals in a circus, when they are used, is to provide an entertaining spectacle for our amusement, often as a way to demonstrate the skill or dominance of the trainer. That is outdated, and it is what we are legislating against.

Clause 2 relates to inspections, for which powers are set out in the schedule. Inspectors will be appointed by the Secretary of State, although we envisage that the numbers required will be small. We already have a small panel of inspectors to enforce the interim wild animals in circuses licensing regime, all of whom are drawn from the Department’s list of zoo licensing veterinary inspectors and are highly experienced in the handling and treatment of wild animals in captivity. Inspectors will be appointed on a case-by-case basis by the Animal and Plant Health Agency to investigate evidence of any offence.

Clause 3 will make a minor consequential amendment to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, which requires persons who wish to keep dangerous wild animals to be licensed. Those who keep dangerous wild animals in a circus are currently exempted from that requirement, but once the new ban comes into force, there should no longer be any vertebrate dangerous wild animals in travelling circuses. We have therefore taken a belt-and-braces approach to make it clear that using dangerous wild vertebrate animals in a travelling circus is not allowed.

The Scottish Government, who have already introduced a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses in Scotland, have asked us to extend to Scotland our amendment to the 1976 Act, and we are pleased to enable that request. Once again, we are grateful for the Scottish Government’s work on this and many other aspects of animal welfare. The Welsh Government are considering their own ban; we have also discussed the matter with the Northern Ireland Government, who are not in a position to consider a ban at this point.

Clause 4 provides for the Bill to come into force on 20 January 2020, the day after the interim circus licensing regulations expire. I hope that I have already reassured hon. Members that it will come into effect in a timely way.

It is worth clarifying what the Bill will not do. First, I make it absolutely clear that we are not proposing to ban circuses, only their use of wild animals. Plenty of travelling circuses do not use wild animals, or indeed any animals, in their acts; the Bill will have no impact on them. Nor will it stop circus operators owning wild animals. If circuses wish to continue to own them after the ban is enacted, they will be subject to the appropriate licensing requirements, for example under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 or under the Department’s 2018 licensing regulations for animals hired out for TV or film productions. If a circus does not intend to continue using wild animals in other work, we expect to see retirement plans being deployed under the interim licensing regulations.

Nor will the ban lead to the banning of other animal exhibits such as falconry displays, zoos, farm parks or the sort of displays that we might see at summer fêtes in our constituencies. Even though such activities may move animal displays from one place to another, they do not fall within the ordinary interpretation of a circus and will therefore not meet the definition of a travelling circus. We do not wish to ban them, because we acknowledge that they have a role to play in education. The important distinction is that circuses move from A to B to C, whereas other displays may go to one place, come back to a home base and go to another place some time later—they are a very different activity.

Lastly, the Bill will apply only to wild animals. I know from parliamentary debates and from my Department’s postbag that the overriding concern is about the use of wild animals in travelling circuses, which is precisely what the Bill will address. Other domestic animals such as horses and dogs will continue to be subject to inspections under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018 to ensure that the highest welfare standards are met.

Continuing to allow wild animals to perform often absurd and unnecessary behaviours for our amusement in travelling circuses goes against the Government’s efforts towards—and the House’s interests in—raising awareness and respect for animals. People can continue to enjoy the experience of going to a circus, but we must move on from the age when wild animals were paraded around as a spectacle. We want people to see animals in a more dignified and natural setting. We cannot make that message clearer than by introducing this Bill to ban that practice. I commend it to the House.
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Circuses are no place for wild animals. That view is shared not only by animal welfare organisations and animal lovers, but by the vast majority of people in our country and—as I am very glad to see—by hon. Members on both sides of the House. As the Minister said, banning wild animals in circuses is a policy that began under Labour before we lost power in 2010, so we support the Bill. It is long overdue, but we are pleased that, having walked the tightrope of parliamentary time so many times, it has now arrived. I thank Members on both sides of the House for their advocacy for wild animals. This will ensure that we can have the greatest shows: circuses that do not have wild animals in them.

In welcoming the Bill, I want to echo some of the points that have been made by hon. Members. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), I ask the Minister where the Bill is to increase the penalties for animal cruelty. The Bill before us is welcome, but it is not the only Bill that we need in relation to animal welfare. That is one of the promises that remains missing.

The Welfare of Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (England) Regulations 2012 will expire in 2020. Now is the time to address this issue once and for all. Forcing wild animals to perform in circuses is one of the most archaic and inhumane forms of animal exploitation. We should be clear that we no longer want it to take place in Britain.

According to the latest figures from September, 19 wild animals are owned by the two remaining circuses that use wild animals in their performances. I am very pleased that the six reindeer, four zebras, three camels, three raccoons, one fox—which is not for hunting—one macaw and one zebu, which of course is a type of humped cattle, will soon be free from their lives in circuses and able to enjoy the rest of their lives without being put on display for our entertainment.

I have received a few questions about the Bill since I mentioned I would be speaking in the debate. I would be grateful if the Minister set out whether birds are included in the Bill, as a few people want to know. I believe that they are, but it would be helpful if the Minister made it clear for the record in her concluding remarks.

The problem with the current regulations is that if the licensing conditions are met, there is nothing to stop more animals and different types of animals returning to circuses unless further action is taken.

The review of the science on the welfare of wild animals in travelling circuses by Professor Stephen Harris, which was commissioned by the Welsh Government and published in April 2016, provides strong evidence that wild animals in travelling circuses not only suffer poor welfare, but do not have a “life worth living”. Every circus animal matters. That is why we should have no wild animals in our circuses anymore. The report built on existing evidence that shows that the welfare needs of non-domesticated wild animals cannot be met within a travelling circus—a conclusion with which the Opposition agree.

I am sure that all hon. Members are animal lovers. I am sure we can all agree that animals need a suitable environment to live in, an appropriate diet, the ability to express normal patterns of behaviour and to be housed properly, whether that is with or without other animals, and that they should not suffer. Wild animals that are used in travelling circuses are carted from one venue to another, sometimes in cramped cages and barren trailers, and are taught to perform tricks, often through fear of punishment. In many cases, animals are not suited to the travelling life, where they are denied their most basic needs. When animals suffer, we all suffer.

Labour planned to ban the use of wild animals in circuses before the 2010 general election. The draft legislation had been prepared and consulted on, with a substantial majority of respondents in favour of a ban. While we are pleased that there is finally parliamentary time for this crucial and urgent Bill, it is disappointing that we have been overtaken by no fewer than 30 countries worldwide in banning the use of wild animals in circuses. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for setting out just how many EU member states have banned the use of wild animals in circuses and showing just how paltry was the Government’s line that our EU membership prevented it.

Kerry McCarthy: My intervention on the Minister was long enough, with the long list of countries, so I did not make the point that I wanted to make. The line that we are not allowed to do things because the European Union will not let us has been used frequently by this Department and by the Minister’s predecessors. For example, there were discussions about limiting the journey times for live exports. Other countries were prepared to sign up to that, but the UK was not prepared to take part in those discussions. We need a thorough investigation into how often that has been used as an excuse, because there are a lot of things we could have done on the animal welfare front that are now coming to a head because we might be leaving the European Union. We could actually have done a lot more.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is right: there have been many times when our membership of the European Union has been used as a reason not to do something, when that has not been true. In many cases, the Government have had the power to change the law for the better. We should be using those powers to do so, not find excuses not to do so.

The previous Labour Government published the draft Wild Animals in Circuses Bill in 2013 but sadly did not make time for it to become law. Despite a 2015 manifesto commitment to implement the ban, the Conservative Government failed to introduce the necessary law in the last Parliament. The Government have been dragging their feet for far too long and I am glad that the Minister who introduced the debate has brought forward the Bill. However, every day that the Bill has not been in place, there have been wild animals in circuses in England that should have been free to enjoy life beyond the circus. That is something that the Government’s action can never take back.

The ban has been on the “to do” list for many years. When out celebrating the re-election of Plymouth’s Labour council last week, the leader of the council, Tudor Evans, told me about the controversial measure to ban wild animals in circuses visiting Plymouth back in 1991, when I was only 11. Plymouth City Council had wanted to do that, but it did not have the power to
do it. However, it discovered that it did have the power to ban animals in theatres, so it did. That caused immediate controversy, with the performance of “The Two Gentlemen of Verona” at the Theatre Royal demanding the use of a dog. Apparently, the show went on without the dog, and circuses will go on without wild animals. That is a lesson that we should all be very proud of.

The Minister mentioned that other countries have led the way in introducing a ban on wild animals in circuses. Scotland has introduced a ban and Wales will be introducing a ban this year. What is happening in Northern Ireland on introducing such a ban on wild animals? While there is no Executive, it is hard for some of the rules we pass in this place to be applied in Northern Ireland. I would be grateful if the Minister set that out so that we can ensure that no wild animals are able to be used in circuses in Northern Ireland.

May I ask the Minister about the robust transition that needs to take place? There must be no unintended consequences when the ban comes into effect. The British Veterinary Zoological Society has highlighted potential concerns about the guidance that will be given regarding the future of wild animals that are currently in circuses. There must be a robust transition process in place to ensure their welfare. I am grateful for the answer the Minister gave to a fellow south-west MP, the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, on ensuring that all the animals will be rehomed in a good way. However, I would be grateful if the Minister who responds gave further reassurance that not a single wild animal that is used in a circus today will be put down because of the new law. I am sure that there are many animal lovers across the country who would love to rehome any of those animals—the raccoons, the macaw, the zebras, the zebu or the reindeer. We must make sure that no animal dies because of this law.

Turning to unintended consequences, we look forward to scrutinising the Bill in Committee. We will consider what amendments to table to clarify how the Bill will work in practice and to ensure that there are no loopholes that a coach and horses, a zebra, a camel or a raccoon can be driven through. For example, the Bill does not contain a clear definition of the word “circus”, so there could be confusion with the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, which are about the use of snakes that are not commonly domesticated but are under the control of humans. Circuses could therefore fall into both areas. They could say that they have a licence under those regulations and operate as a travelling exhibition if the term “circus” remains undefined.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for setting out that concern. There is a need to tighten the definition and I would be grateful if the Minister looked favourably on attempts by the Opposition and, I suspect, Government Members to do that.

The Opposition will also explore powers to enforce the ban on wild animals in circuses. We will consider what powers will be needed to seize animals that are used in circuses after the ban comes into place, what powers courts should have to disqualify offenders from keeping animals if there is repeat offending, what powers of entry should be extended to constables and appointed inspectors, and what additional support the Government will give to ban the national wildlife crime unit by extending its funding. There are only 12 officers in the unit, which is nearly one officer per wild animal in a circus today, but it is very important that their excellent work continues after the current funding round comes to an end. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what plans the Government have to extend that funding.

There is never enough animal welfare. We need to give a voice to the animals because they do not have one. That is why it is right that we have heard interventions from both sides of the House in support of greater animal welfare. I am very pleased to be a Labour MP, because Labour is the party of animal welfare. From bringing forward the landmark Hunting Act 2004 to protecting domestic animals under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, Labour has always placed the welfare of animals high on the policy agenda.

The hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) asked about an all-encompassing animal welfare Bill. If the Government choose not to introduce such a Bill, the hon. Gentleman need only vote for a Labour Government. We have made a policy commitment to introduce a broad animal welfare Bill to ensure that all animals are protected, based on our animal welfare plan, which has been published and consulted on.

Labour fought for animal sentience to be part of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, but, sadly, that was voted down by the Government. I hope that it will return as a full provision. At a European level, Labour has helped to secure better welfare standards for battery hens and chickens, and has tightened the rules on the transport of live animals. That is a record of which my party can rightly be proud, but it is also a record that requires us constantly to ask for improvements, and to support animal welfare wherever the animals may be, in the United Kingdom and abroad. My party and I, believe, Members on both sides of the House will continue to do that.

Labour will support the Bill tonight, and I hope that the Minister will take our suggestions on board in the good faith in which they were intended. I think that there is cross-party support for the Bill, not only in the House but among the public. Labour will seek to tighten the rules to ensure that there are no wild animals in our circuses, and that all the wild animals that are currently in circuses can have a good life after their days of entertaining people have come to an end.

7.11 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I support the Bill, not least because, as a Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I spoke in favour of such a Bill on many occasions. As a number of Members have pointed out, it has been on the agenda for some time—it was a manifesto commitment in both 2015 and 2017—and, as the Minister said, the existing licensing regulations will expire in 2020, so it is necessary to ensure that we have something with which to replace them.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, of which I was a member when I was a Member, examined this issue in some detail. At that point, the committee proposed a slightly different approach to dealing with this challenge. It proposed an annexe to the Bill listing the animals that would not be allowed to be
in travelling circuses: a negative list. We envisaged that the most controversial species—lions, tigers and elephants—would be banned immediately, and that other species, such as snakes and camels, could also be removed in due course. I understand that, in the event, DEFRA took the view that that was over-complicating the issue, given that 19 species were involved, and that a simple ban was what was needed.

As the Minister said, this has been on the agenda since 2011. My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who has just left the Chamber, initiated a number of debates at that time. The initial debate followed a public reaction to the terrible abuse of Anne the elephant in one of the circuses in this country. I am happy to say that a couple of years ago I visited Longleat safari park, where Anne now has a new home, is being properly cared for, and is ending her days in a suitable fashion.

Now that the Bill is before us, I think it important for us to perform our role as legislators: to scrutinise it, and to ensure that there are no inconsistencies in its application. As the Minister pointed out, it is a rather unusual Bill to deal with the regulation of animal welfare and the way in which we manage animals. It imposes a ban not on the grounds of animal welfare, but on ethical grounds.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I have great respect for the former Minister, as he knows. Does he share my lack of understanding of the fact that animal welfare was never a reason for us to ban wild animals in circuses, and that—as he has just mentioned—we had to find alternative ethical grounds? Surely the Animal Welfare Act 2006 was the appropriate vehicle for these measures.

George Eustice: It was, but, as the hon. Gentleman says, the legal advice was that these were not necessarily animal welfare issues per se.

I support the Bill. I have argued for it, and I want it to be passed. A number of Members have said that it is perhaps a little overdue; I was in the Department and it took time for this to be done, so I cannot criticise others on that front.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

George Eustice: I am going to make some progress.

However, the Bill does raise some anomalies. For instance, two or three of the animals in the list of 19 are camels. They will be banned from circuses in future, but I understand that camel racing takes place in some venues in the country, and that that practice would continue. Only a few years ago, there was a dancing raccoon on “Britain’s Got Talent”, the ITV show. Do we think that that is ethical? If it is not ethical to have a dancing raccoon in a circus, why is it ethical to have one on “Britain’s Got Talent”?

What about falconry displays? They travel from agricultural show to agricultural show. Falcons are wild animals. What is the difference? We are starting to enter borderline territories.

Then there is the issue of snakes. There is a growing trend for the keeping of corn snakes and other exotic pets such as bearded dragons, a type of lizard. Are we convinced that every 10-year-old boy in the land who has a corn snake or a bearded dragon is looking after that pet adequately? A number of vets are increasingly concerned about the welfare of some of these pets, not least because many vets lack the expertise to deal with their specialist needs. Why is it OK to have pet snakes with, in many cases, no regulation at all unless they are deemed to be a species of dangerous wild animal, while having one in a circus is seen as wrong? And what about reindeer? There is nothing in the Bill to prevent a reindeer from being outside a Santa’s Grotto, yet reindeer in circuses will now be banned.

I have made all those comments not to suggest that I will oppose the Bill—as I have said, I fully support it—but simply to highlight a matter that I think we ought to consider. As we introduce a rather unusual Bill that is based on ethics rather than animal welfare, it will throw up issues that we, and those tasked with implementing the policy, will have to resolve, and we ought to be thinking about those issues now.

7.17 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a privilege to speak for the Scottish National party on this important Bill, which is crucial to future animal welfare legislation. I thank the excellent animal welfare organisations that have campaigned on the issue for many years. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but let me name just a few: the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Animal Defenders International, Animal Justice Project, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

As the Minister said, the Scottish Government passed legislation to ban the use of wild animals in travelling circuses in 2017. Forcing wild animals to travel in circuses and perform confusing and degrading tricks is an outdated practice that has no place in our modern, compassionate society. Animal welfare remains a vital area of concern for the Scottish Government, who will establish a Scottish animal welfare commission to give advice and set best policy standards and practice.

The Bill is important, and is fully supported by the SNP. I know that the Minister has been in contact with the Scottish Government, who agree that it strengthens existing legislation and makes progress for the future. I do not think that “borderline territories” such as those mentioned by the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) are sufficient reason for procrastination, although I note the importance of the points that he raised. I am pleased that steps are being taken now, and that they will lead to further steps, however difficult they may be to resolve in the future.

The Bill is important in many respects. The first relates to animal welfare. There may be only a few animals in today’s circuses in the United Kingdom, but we cannot avoid noticing, with empathy, that they live in cramped travelling conditions. They are often transported in small cages in vans, or in barren trailers. They are taught to perform—owing to their fear of punishment—in artificial surroundings. That is certainly not entertainment, and animals themselves are not entertainment. These practices must not continue anywhere across the UK, and I hope the Governments in Wales and Northern Ireland will quickly follow suit in relation to this legislation.

The second important point is education—education of our future generations—because this is the right thing to do. The right thing to do is to wonder in the resplendence of wild animals in their natural habitats,
behaving in the wild in a way that is entirely free and natural. The right thing to do is to learn respect for wild animals as living beings, not tools of man or money-making objects, to want to do our bit to preserve species and to protect biodiversity, to teach the importance of conserving endangered species for our children and our children’s children, and to recognise how wondrous the world is via different cultures and species, and nature and our planet.

The third issue is public awareness and what the public demands. We are all here by courtesy of the public and of the voters in our constituencies. Public consultation has consistently found that 94.5%, and similar high percentages, of respondents in all areas of the UK support a ban, because the public know that circuses do not provide animals with psychologically or physically healthy lives. The public abhor the abuse in circuses that has been uncovered by Animal Defenders International, whose members have gone undercover and investigated British circuses over the past 20 years to expose it. They realise, as per the work of Professor Stephen Harris at Bristol University, that the life of animals in circuses does not constitute a good life or even a life worth living.

As others have said, the Minister should consider funding for the national wildlife crime unit; this issue was raised during the good work done on the Ivory Act 2018 and it must be addressed.

We must now join cross-party and work together to do all we can to secure the swift progress of this Bill. I thank all MPs here today, and MPs past and present who have wholeheartedly supported a ban over the decades; today they can be proud because we take this step towards this ban together built on their efforts in the name of improving animal welfare standards for the good of the animals and society.

7.22 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

I welcome the Bill, but further to what my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—I do call him an hon. Friend—said, I am interested in why this is being done on ethical rather than animal welfare grounds. Government lawyers have made heavy weather of this Bill. As several Members across the House have said, we have been dealing with this for a long time; this was one of the first issues that I dealt with when I came into the House in 2010, and it rumbled on and on through various Secretaries of State, and now we have finally got there, which I greatly welcome.

When I asked a question of the Minister just now and said that the animals were not wild, I suppose that technically I was wrong, but the point I wanted to make is that they are neither wild nor domesticated because they have been so used to performing in circuses and to being taken around. I am not saying that was the right thing to do to them, but we cannot just suddenly turn them back into the wild, because they are not strictly wild animals. If we put the reindeer back into Norway or Sweden or wherever they could roam naturally, I am not sure for one moment that they would survive. That is the issue: we have to make sure that not only are these animals banned from travelling circuses but they are looked after. The No. 1 priority is that they are not put down of course, but they do need to be looked after properly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), a previous agriculture Minister, made the further point that lots of other types of animals—snakes, lizards and all sorts of other things—are being kept for various reasons. We live in a block of flats in Battersea and, interestingly, mice and dead chicks are brought in. I am not sure the inhabitants of the flats are eating those chicks; I think we will find that snakes and other animals are eating them. So lots of animals are being kept across the piece and we must make sure they are looked after properly. We cannot expect this Bill to deal with that, but the point has been made that it is interesting what people will keep in their homes, and then there is the question of whether their homes are fit for it and whether they should be keeping them. There are also all sorts of other animals, such as primates, that should not be kept at home, and we must deal with that.

I do not wish to detain the House, but the point has been made that there are other species that we need to look at. I welcome the fact that the 19 animals from both the Circus Mondao and Peter Jolly’s will no longer be able to perform after 2020, but I reiterate that we must make sure they are properly looked after afterwards, a point that I think we all agree on across the House.

7.26 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful to be called to participate briefly in this uncontroversial and consensual debate, and it is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish); although we sit on opposite sides of the House, we are on very good terms and share a lot of common ground, especially on animal welfare issues. Like him, and everyone else who has spoken and is likely to speak, I support the Bill, and I congratulate the Government and the Minister on bringing it forward. I am grateful to the RSPCA, the British Veterinary Association, Animal Defenders International, the Born Free Foundation and the Commons Library for their briefings and assistance.

This Bill has been quite a long time getting here. Its provisions were omitted from the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and picked up again by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2009, following continued lobbying by animal welfare groups. I was Minister of State then, and the consultation in 2009 that we held on this issue, as mentioned by the Minister, led me and the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and
Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), to say approaching the 2010 general election that if re-elected we were minded to ban wild animals in circuses, but of course we never got the chance. The coalition then ran into a number of the same obstacles Labour had encountered when in office, and immediately the Bill was back in the slow lane.

Various explanations followed, such as that it was a European matter, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), and that it could not be determined by nation states. The suspicion arose that there was a departmental disagreement between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and DEFRA and the Government could not agree on a unified position, or it was said that a licensing regime could do the job better. However, as has been said, neither side of the House was persuaded by any of the explanations and there were various debates, oral questions, written parliamentary questions, ten-minute rule Bills, lobbies and public pressure, all the way to the next general election in 2015. At that time, every main political party went into the general election committed to a ban. Public support has always been high, at more than 70%, and the consultation we held in 2009 showed that more than 94% were in support of a ban.

It is not difficult to conclude that transporting wild animals around the country in heavy goods vehicles and keeping them in temporary confined spaces for the duration of visits to various locations is not in the best interest of the animals, physically or psychologically, and that it is contrary to their welfare. I am sure that the public got that before the Government did. There is confusion as to whether this is an animal welfare issue or an ethical one. I understand that there are some separations, but locking wild animals up in HGVs and transporting them around the country, then putting them in small temporary enclosures for the duration of visits, is primarily an animal welfare issue. If taking the ethics route gets the job done, I am happy to do that, but I believe that there is a fundamental animal welfare question here as well.

The British Veterinary Association concludes:

“...the welfare needs of non-domesticated, wild animals cannot be met within a travelling circus—in terms of housing or being able to express normal behaviour.”

That is what I think is called a no-brainer. The RSPCA has raised four issues that it wants to see addressed in Committee. Several of them have already been mentioned, so I will not repeat the arguments, but the headings are: the definition of a travelling circus; the power of the courts to disqualify individuals from keeping wild animals; the limits of appointed inspectors; and the powers to seize animals. The Minister has generously indicated that both Ministers will be prepared to discuss all those matters in Committee.

Given that we have all waited so long, we want the best conclusion and the best Bill. We want to ensure that it is as fit for purpose as we can make it. Given the assurances that we have received from the Minister, I am looking forward to the Committee stage of the Bill. I am confident that we will continue to adopt a consensual tone that has characterised this Second Reading debate and that we will get the Bill on the statute book in less time than it has taken to get to this point.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for taking the Bill through our parliamentary process. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), for his dedication in seeing it through and for his detailed explanation of the Bill today.

Many Members have been involved in campaigning for this ban over many years. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who rightly distinguishes between the conditions that a wild animal experiences while on the road and during and in between performances, and those of an animal in a conservation park or zoo, where animals can be enclosed in areas reflecting their native environment, where the public benefit from gaining knowledge and where they will therefore be better able to support the work of breeding programmes and wider conservation.

Yesterday, while welcoming a delegation of Indian travel company representatives to Muncaster Castle as part of a VisitBritain campaign to encourage the visitor economy in Copeland, we enjoyed an incredible display of sky hunters, including owls, hawks and vultures flying high in the sky and swooping and diving, with the mountains of the English Lake district as their backdrop. These experiences capture our imagination and dazzle, while also teaching us about natural habits, abilities and vulnerabilities. For example, we learned yesterday that vultures are perilously close to extinction. These opportunities and organisations have my full support. However, making wild animals travel in crates and perform unnatural tasks for our amusement does not have my support and nor does it have the support of the public.

If successful, the Bill will become an Act of Parliament preventing the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. As world leaders in animal welfare, we are strengthening our position as animal protectors. The Bill follows a long list of other protections making progress in the House, including making CCTV mandatory in slaughter-houses, improving puppy welfare and bringing about one of the world’s toughest bans on ivory sales.

Prison sentences for animal abusers have been increased and I look forward to a ban on the live export of animals for slaughter when we leave the EU.

The ban in this Bill would not be possible without the vast amount of work carried out by the DEFRA team, officials and organisations such as the RSPCA, all of whom have got us this far. I put on record my thanks to all of them as the Bill, which I will be support in the Lobby tonight, makes progress through Parliament.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): As we have heard from so many hon. Members today, this Bill is long overdue. We have heard about the many earlier attempts to get this ban on the statute book. A statement from the Government in 2012 indicated that they were going to pursue this path, so the Bill today is well overdue.

My constituents have been contacting me about this issue since I became a Member of Parliament, and I know that people feel strongly about it. Indeed, a change.org petition on the subject attracted more than 200,000 signatures—I know that many of my constituents signed
it—and there have been other e-petitions along the way. It is about time that we moved on from this archaic practice and recognised that our entertainment comes at a huge price—the welfare and care of the animals that are moved from place to place in poor conditions and under a great deal of stress. As I have said, this Bill is well overdue.

In 2010, a Labour Government public consultation found that 94.5% of respondents supported a ban, which really is not surprising. Animals in circuses are subjected to brutal training methods and violence, which have no place in our society. I am glad that it looks as though a ban will finally be imposed. As others have said, it is frustrating that we are way behind the times in this country. Many countries across the globe have already implemented similar bans, and it is simply unacceptable that the UK is left lagging behind other countries with regard to animal welfare standards in circuses. Furthermore, recent research shows that animal freedoms and animal rights are not being adhered to, even though people care very much about them. That is why I am keen to speak in this debate.

Hon. Members have referred to various issues that will require work in Committee. They include the definition of a travelling circus; the powers to seize animals; liability; the disqualification of offenders from keeping wild animals; and the power of entry. I am sure that all those details can be dealt with in Committee. A key issue is the definition of a travelling circus, and I hope that great consideration will be given to ensuring that people’s concerns are addressed in that respect.

I am glad to see this Bill coming forward, but a lot of other important animal legislation is needed and my constituents are certainly keen to see it passed. The issue of recognising animal sentience has been mentioned, as has the fact that we missed the opportunity to include that in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. We have also talked about longer sentences for animal cruelty and about extending the scope of the Ivory Act 2018, which will be familiar territory for many people in the Chamber today.

I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us about the fate of the animals that are currently in circuses. Can he confirm that what happens to them will be monitored? The question of monitoring is a consistent theme when we look at legislation to protect wildlife; it was also discussed during the passage of the Ivory Bill. The same concerns apply to the strengthening of the National Wildlife Crime Unit. Can the Minister confirm that the unit’s funding will be continued?

7.39 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and to take part in this debate. Times change, and when they do we have to change the rules and regulations to reflect mindsets. To some in this House, it might seem like only yesterday that films such as “The Greatest Show on Earth” with Dorothy Lamour and Charlton Heston were great hits because they had the romance and excitement of circus life.

If we fast-forward to just a few weeks ago, as a father I made probably the worst decision I have ever made in my life when I decided to take my three daughters to see the remake of “Dumbo”. My eldest daughter, Imogen, just about managed to survive with some degree of stoicism. My middle daughter, Jessica, cried five times during the film. My youngest daughter, Laura, had to be taken out of the cinema by me, so upset had she become by the film. I have to say I was rather relieved because I, too, was finding the film rather upsetting. The question they asked at the rescue centre afterwards—also known as Pizza Express Dorchester—was, “Why? Why would you have an elephant in a circus? Why would you treat an elephant like that?” I think that just shows the change in our society.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Everyone in the Chamber is completely committed to the welfare of animals, including me, but will my hon. Friend think about what he is saying? If he is saying that an animal does not belong in a circus—I accept that that is what the vast majority of people believe is right—does he think that animals in other contexts should be where they are? Does an animal belong in a zoo? Does a horse belong on a racecourse? Does a greyhound belong in a greyhound stadium? He has to look at the implications and precedent that legislation sets.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think I can help, because what the hon. Gentleman asks would broaden the debate outside the scope of circuses. The Bill is about circus animals. It is not about breeding programmes in zoos or different things. The hon. Gentleman is comparing horses and dogs to a circus, but the Bill is about wild animals in circuses. I would like to keep the debate contained to the subject before us.

Simon Hoare: If I may, I will reply briefly and within order to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) raised. Representing Romford, he would be a very brave man to suggest that greyhound racing should be stopped. He makes a valid point. I can well remember being taken as a young boy to Barry zoo, which Vale of Glamorgan Council eventually closed because it was so fiendishly awful and the treatment of its animals was so bad. Standards have to reflect the very highest standards of animal welfare.

Those days have gone. When circuses were at their most popular and wild animals were in use, circuses could say, “We are doing some sort of education as well.” However, the likes of David Attenborough and co have changed that. We can be educated in our own homes about wild animals in their natural habitats and we can get more information and education in that way. Those people do that important job in a much better way.

I can remember as a boy being taken—my mother is still not entirely sure why—to Gerry Cottle and Billy Smart’s circus when it performed in Cardiff. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) nodding almost with reminiscence at those names. We never left those circuses elevated by joy; we left with a terrible feeling of sadness. There was something alien, wrong and outdated about it, even in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It just goes to show that sometimes this place needs to find ways of moving far more quickly to better reflect changes in mindset.

I was pleased and proud to be a co-sponsor when my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) brought forward a Bill on this issue in February 2016. I am delighted to see him in his place. I remember, as on similar occasions, that it was opposed by my hon. Friend
the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). I have to say that anything opposed by him usually seems a good thing in my book.

I am delighted by this Bill. I am grateful that Ministers are bringing it forward. I know that the numbers we are talking about are low, but I view the Bill as a sender of a message and an articulation of a set of values. It is also an insurance policy. Were there to be a European renaissance of wild animals performing in circuses, through this legislation the message would go out from the House and across our parties that such circuses would not be welcome in the UK.

7.45 pm

Sandy Martin: Would the hon. Gentleman clarify something? Does he feel that the legislation should be extended to performing animals—animals in adverts or films? Where would he extend it to? At what point would he say it is okay for a wild animal or any creature to take part in something? Would he stop at circuses, or would he go further?

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I said, we should not allow our wish to have a comprehensive animal welfare Bill to get in the way of our passing this specific Bill, which has the support of the whole House.

The way we treat animals is often a litmus test of how we treat human beings and I believe that the steps we are taking in this country and around the world to show not only kindness but respect to other creatures are important in creating the consciousness we desperately need if we are to protect our planet and all its creatures.

So many people in this country are concerned about our treatment of animals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blydon (Liz Twist) emphasised. People have hopes for a better world and a million dreams ride on our better relationship with our fellow creatures. Even if all the animals performing in circuses in this country were healthy and happy, there is something fundamentally demeaning about using animals to do tricks for our entertainment and we should not be encouraging it.

Animal welfare is an ethical issue. Although it is true that only 19 wild animals are currently performing in circuses in England and Wales, this is meaningful legislation. There is no guarantee in the licensing system currently in operation that that number could not grow. Indeed, the licensing regime ends in January next year. Unless we pass the Bill in time, so that it comes into operation in January, there is a danger that there will be no restrictions on the use of wild animals in circuses. We do not want to see the humiliation of lions, tigers and bears coming alive in our circuses once again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned other countries that have already implemented the ban, but we need to be aware of the appalling cruelty meted out to various animals in other countries, such as bears milked for their bile in China or beach donkeys in Santorini. How can we argue for decent treatment for animals around the world unless we are seen to be above reproach in this country?

Most circuses in this country stopped using wild animals years ago, and I believe that some of the biggest circuses made that decision entirely voluntarily before the licensing system was ever introduced because they recognised from first-hand experience that it is no longer acceptable for circuses to feature such acts. However, unless we act to implement a ban, there is a continuing danger that other less scrupulous circuses will take trade away from those that have made the ethical choice. We need to act now to enable those that have behaved honourably in this matter to flourish.

Above all, I am amazed it has taken us so long to get to this stage. After my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) introduced his ten-minute rule Bill in September 2014, was it really necessary for hon. Members to object to it 12 times; it was finally dropped in April 2015? And did an hon. Member really need to object to the ten-minute rule Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) in 2015?

A similar Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) fell due to the general election in 2017. An almost identical private Member’s Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) was due to be heard in October but, if the Government had not taken it on, it would almost certainly have been blocked by an hon. Member, just as the Bills on upskirting and female genital mutilation were blocked.

It is a great relief that the Government have finally taken on this Bill, but it is a matter of regret that we could not have dealt with this issue before now. I fully agree with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) that the Government need to get on with the Animal Cruelty (Sentencing) Bill, too.

This Bill is long overdue, and it has the full support of every party and of the campaigning groups that have worked to get us to this point. I look forward to it passing into law at the earliest possible moment.

7.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is my pleasure and privilege to respond to this debate, and I thank hon. and right hon. Members from all parties for their contributions. I am encouraged by the general consensus in the House that this Bill addresses an important question about the treatment of wild animals, and I am convinced it can make quick progress, which is clearly the desire of hon. Members present today.
Many animal welfare charities, veterinary groups and, of course, parliamentarians have been calling for this ban, and I recognise the huge public support for it, too. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), is particularly grateful to the RSPCA, the Born Free Foundation and the British Veterinary Association for their support on this matter.

Public attitudes have clearly changed over time, and we now recognise that wild animals no longer belong in travelling circuses. Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) is not yet back in his place—perhaps he is not as quick as a zebra or a racing camel—but there were 10,572 responses to the consultation issued in 2009, and an additional 2,500 postcards. Approximately 95% of those who responded to the consultation suggested that the best way to improve welfare would be to ban the use of wild animals in travelling circuses.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and the whole team has done a great job on this Bill. I apologise for being late, but I was at the World Wildlife Fund launch of “Our Planet”, which is another wonderful Attenborough film about biodiversity and protecting our wonderful cornucopia of wild species. It seems so timely that we are discussing this Bill in a week when the UN has published a big report on declining species. It is more important than ever that we make our mark by saying that we cannot have wild animals performing for us in circuses.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the state of biodiversity in the world. I was privileged to be at the G7 summit when we had a presentation from the intergovernmental science-policy platform on biodiversity and ecosystem services on this issue, and I can assure her that the leading countries of the world are actively working together and have declared the Metz charter on biodiversity. She is right to stress the importance of wild animals being in their normal places, rather than providing unusual forms of entertainment, which is what the Bill seeks to address.

Andrew Rosindell: I wholeheartedly endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). Can the Minister tell the House how we will define “wild animal”? That is central to this Bill and we need a clear definition of where we stand, as well as potential definitions and about the amendments that could potentially down any animals as a consequence of this Bill. Indeed, the owners of the two circuses that they will not be putting animals to provide evidence of such an offence.

Dr Coffey: I can answer my hon. Friend directly, because clause 1(5) states that “‘wild animal’ means an animal of a kind which is not commonly domesticated in Great Britain.” I hope that answers his point.

The Scottish Government’s 2014 consultation ahead of their ban showed similar figures in support, and last year’s consultation by the Welsh Government on a proposed ban found some 97% in favour. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said earlier, this is an outdated practice that no longer reflects the views of modern society, and I am pleased that we have started the Bill’s passage through Parliament.

My hon. Friend has already replied to some of the points raised in this debate, and he was generous in saying that some of the issues that have been raised can be considered in Committee, and it is important that they are.

On the European Union and the limits of legislation, there was a legal challenge to the ban introduced by Austria under the European services directive. I am confident the Government did not say a ban could not be introduced, but we had to wait for the outcome of that challenge to understand how we can properly legislate to do this. The legal challenge failed, which has given us confidence to bring this Bill forward.

It is also worth pointing out to the House that, although we have heard about a number of countries that have banned wild animals in circuses, many of the exemptions are a lot more generous than the Bill allows for. We have come up with an exemplary Bill that will be more comprehensive than the legislation in other countries.

Are birds included? If they meet the definition of “wild animal” in clause 1(5), they will be included.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and a number of other Members mentioned the Animal Cruelty (Sentencing) Bill, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is conscious of that. He is responsible for animal welfare—I tend to deal with wild animals—and we are both committed, as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, to making sure that we find the appropriate parliamentary vehicle to do so.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) asked about Northern Ireland, and the Administration have been consulted on this issue. As it stands, the Administration do not believe it is appropriate at this point to join in this Bill, recognising it is a significant policy decision and would need to be devolved. I assure the House that we have been told by the owners of the two circuses that they will not be putting any animals as a consequence of this Bill. Indeed, their retirement plans are already in place, as my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary made clear.

A variety of questions have been asked about the potential definitions and about the amendments that might be tabled, such as on powers to seize an animal. Where any evidence is found of a wild animal being mistreated, the Animal Welfare Act will, of course, apply and provides powers to seize animals should there be grounds to do so. The Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 also provides powers of seizure and, depending on the species of animal, may also be applicable. We have not provided powers to seize animals where it is demonstrated that an offence has been committed, but inspectors have powers to video or photograph an animal to provide evidence of such an offence.

Several Members mentioned the national wildlife crime unit, for which there is funding here, but I am sure the House understands that the Government will shortly be starting a spending review. I have no doubt that my Department will be pushing for the unit to continue being funded because we believe it has an important role in tackling wildlife crime. Indeed, the unit received additional funding from the Department to address new avenues of wildlife crime.

The Conservative party introduced the most important piece of legislation, on which we still heavily rely, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. We have had additional
legislation specific to badgers and wild mammals in 1992 and 1996. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 was another milestone in making sure that appropriate legislation was put in place.

On biodiversity, I am pleased about our position on international obligations; I genuinely believe the passing of the Ivory Act 2018 will be a significant element in that.

On the welfare of pets such as snakes, we were asked why it is okay to have no regulations. In fact, there are regulations; these animals are covered by the Animal Welfare Act, as they are seen as animals that are cared for, as opposed to other kinds of animals that may be used in so-called performances, be it in Santa’s grotto or elsewhere. The new Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) England Regulations 2018 apply to those, and there is a specific reason in respect of what is happening in circuses. This Bill does not seek to prohibit wild animals in other activities; it is not a loophole. Those regulations specifically require those activities to be licensed.

There has been a lot of discussion about ethical and welfare matters, and why one thing is happening and not the other. The Government are clear, and have been for some time, including under previous Administrations, that the scope of the 2006 Act did not give the necessary powers in this regard. Section 12 provides powers only to regulate to promote the welfare of animals. I appreciate that people, including hon. Members, may have different views on this. No robust scientific evidence is available to indicate that the basic welfare needs of wild animals cannot be met in a travelling circus environment. Moreover, the review of the Department’s interim circus regulations found that the regulations were successful in establishing an effective licensing scheme to promote and monitor high welfare standards for wild animals in travelling circuses in England.

Andrew Rosindell: I wish to clarify something for the benefit of the whole House and everyone outside who works with animals, including performing animals. The Minister mentioned Santa’s grotto, and we have all seen animals in our constituencies for different special events. Can she tell the House how this new law will affect such events? In line with the question I posed earlier, may I ask where the ultimate end to this is? Is she saying that, ultimately, animals will not be able to take part in any kind of performance, be it a film, special activity or outside event? Where will this conclude?

Dr Coffey: This is specifically about circuses, and the basis for it is the itinerant nature of such events and what happens when these animals are moved. Falconry and displays have been mentioned. Typically, a falcon returns to its principal place of residence after such a display, so the effect is not the same. I assure my hon. Member that is also the legal position of the Scottish and Welsh Governments, and that the bans that have been brought forward have been justified on ethical, not welfare, grounds.

Let me deal with some other aspects of questions that have been asked. I think I have addressed the questions asked by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), and I welcome the fact that the legislative consent motion will go through to make sure that the amendment is passed and the legislation has a smooth passage. I have already addressed the question about animal sentencing and when that can be undertaken.

I am very conscious of the strong support given today by hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), my hon. Friends the Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), for Tiverton and Honiton and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), the hon. Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, and my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). A variety of people have decided to attend this debate and support this Bill. I hope that that support will continue in Committee. It is an honour to have closed this debate. We care passionately about this and I am sure the same spirit will continue as the Bill makes its passage through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES (NO. 2) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 23 May 2019.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.
Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 7 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (BROADCASTING)

That the draft Electronic Communications (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 March, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (TRANSPORT)

That the Railways (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 826), dated 5 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 April, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (HEALTH AND SAFETY)

That the Railways (Safety Management) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 825), dated 5 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 April, be approved.

That the Rail Safety (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 837), dated 5 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 9 April, be approved.

—(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.

Food Poverty: Scotland

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

8.5 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I want to start by reflecting on a scene from Ken Loach’s 2016 film “I, Daniel Blake”, where Katie Morgan, overcome with hunger, begins to eat cold baked beans from a can in her local food bank. Hayley Squires’ powerful performance as Katie struck a chord with people. It was a stark reminder of the real impact that food poverty has in communities across the UK.

In 2015, NHS Health Scotland conducted its initial research on the nature and extent of food poverty in Scotland, finding that food poverty arose because of individuals being on a very low income or facing destitution. That restricts their choice of what food they can buy as well as when and where they can buy it. The research highlighted that food poverty also had negative impacts on an individual’s health and wellbeing. Other research undertaken in the UK has found a link between food poverty and certain medical conditions or illnesses.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. It is appropriate that he cited “I, Daniel Blake”. Does he agree that many of those on low incomes find themselves working in the public sector for UK Government Departments, where they have had a public sector pay freeze for at least 10 years, and are having to rely on food banks because of the poverty pay they are on?

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, and I would agree with that point, because the wages have not matched the rises in food prices.

International research has also found that the more severe a person’s experience of food insecurity, the more likely they are to seek help from healthcare services. Further international studies have shown that going hungry just a handful of times can lead an individual to develop poorer mental and physical health. Both this domestic and international research emphasises that food poverty is a public health issue. I welcome the Scottish Government’s recognition of food poverty being a public health issue. The inclusion of questions on food insecurity in the 2018 Scottish health survey was a positive step. The survey revealed those who are most likely to find themselves living in food poverty across Scotland; 18% of those in deprived areas live in food poverty, which compares with a figure of just 3% in the least deprived areas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. In my constituency and across Northern Ireland we have some of the highest levels of poverty among children and families. Does he agree that it is essential that we seek to protect the most vulnerable in our society, who are having to choose either to eat or heat? The Government must do more on pension credit. Does he agree that they should put more emphasis on the accessing of pension credit by vulnerable people to enable them to deal with the poverty they clearly have? May I also say that it is nice to see the Under-Secretary of State for...
Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), and that we look forward to a good response from him?

Hugh Gaffney: I was actually coming on to that point about heat or eat. It is a very well used phrase, but perhaps it should be used more often. Some 13% of 16 to 44-year-olds live in food poverty compared with just 1% of those over 65. A total of 21% of single parents also live in food poverty—what a shameful situation. The UK is the world’s fifth largest economy, yet the Scottish Health Survey revealed that one in 10 Scots lives in food poverty.

The Independent Food Aid Network had identified 2,000 food banks currently operating in the UK, 212 of which are in Scotland. I pay tribute to the volunteers at all food banks, particularly to those at the Coatbridge community food bank and the Viewpark food bank in my constituency. They work tirelessly to support families who find themselves in food poverty as a result of the austerity policies pursued by this Government. I have previously supported the Coatbridge community food bank to secure an additional warehouse, and I will support those volunteers looking to establish a food bank in Moodiesburn as well.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous in giving way. He quite rightly praises the food bank volunteers and provides me with the opportunity to praise the great work of the Glasgow South West food bank, but does he agree that if it were not for the generosity of his constituents and my constituents these food banks would not exist? It is the community that should be thanked for its generosity.

Hugh Gaffney: I agree wholeheartedly. Where would we be in this country without the volunteers? Let us ask the volunteers to take a day off and then see how this country survives. I say thanks to all the volunteers who get involved.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point in thanking the volunteers and those who donate to food banks. The ones who are listed in the numbers do not cover the full gamut of people who provide help. The mosques, the churches and the gurdwaras in my constituency are also very generous in making sure that people can get a hot meal when they need it. Does he agree that these are also a valuable part of the community that contributes so much?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I do agree. In fact, I was in Bellshill West Parish Church last week and spoke to the ladies who are involved in this work in the community. These are people who are not recognised as helpers, but they do a tremendous job helping out to fill the gaps—no, they do more than that.

I wish that we did not have to live in a country where food banks are needed in constituencies such as mine across the country. NHS Health Scotland recognises that food banks are a symbol of a food poverty crisis in Scotland. It states that “the existence of emergency food aid provision reflects the growth of chronic severe food poverty.”
also found to have monthly household incomes of no greater than £500. Some 16% were even found to have no income at all in the month before they became a food bank user. The food poverty crisis is clearly driven by low pay, insecure employment and the Government's welfare reforms.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman is making a good point about the causes of food poverty that are driving people to food banks. Some of my constituents have been designated as having no recourse to public funds and, despite being in work, they cannot earn enough money to feed their families and are forced to go to food banks. Does he agree that no recourse to public funds is a policy that this Government should ditch?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I do agree. I also believe that the Scottish Government could act as well. It is time for both the UK and the Scottish Governments to act. The devolution of welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament allows the Scottish Government to make different choices. They could listen to Scottish Labour’s calls to scrap the two-child cap and top-up child benefit by £5 per week. They could choose to not delay the implementation of the income supplement until 2022. Scots living in food poverty now cannot continue to suffer because of the Scottish Government’s inaction.

The UK Government have made a welcome commitment that they will seek to include an official measure of food insecurity in the annual Department for Work and Pensions survey of household incomes and living standards, but I have concerns as to whether the data collected will then be assessed by the Government to help them develop policies to combat food poverty. Data about the level of food bank use in Scotland already exists, thanks to the work of organisations such as the Independent Food Aid Network. I asked the Government whether they used that data to make an assessment of the level of food bank use in Scotland and how to address it, but I was told that the Government had made no such assessment. If the Government will not use the data that is already available, how can we be sure that they will use data collected in the future to help them develop policies to tackle food poverty?

Jim Shannon: There has been an 18% increase in the use of food banks in my constituency because of delays and reductions in benefit payments, and an increase in debt. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those who are involved in the food banks are often forgotten in these debates? In my constituency, all the churches came together and make contributions collectively. Is it not time that we recognised the contributions of all the good people who make such efforts?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes. I repeat: where would we be without the volunteers and the people who help to support the food banks?

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I pay tribute to the many organisations in my constituency—the gurdwaras, churches and mosques—that do so much to address this issue, and to the tremendous volunteers who assist. Would the hon. Gentleman agree that the Scottish Government are trying to address food poverty and sort it out without having the powers to address the welfare cuts and benefits freeze from the UK Government that lie behind so much of the food poverty, and that they are really operating with one hand tied behind their back?

Hugh Gaffney: I disagree: both Governments can do more to address food poverty across the UK.

The Russell Trust has rightly highlighted the impact of the Government’s welfare reforms on the level of food bank use. Even the Secretary of State herself appears to accept that there is a link between universal credit and food bank use. I hope that she will now respond positively to the calls of the Russell Trust and immediately end the five-week wait for universal credit payments. I also want the Chancellor to end the benefits freeze immediately. The Government have the responsibility to end low pay and insecure employment in the UK economy.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important issue to the House. I also thank all the excellent food banks in my constituency, including Loaves and Fishes, Greenhills Methodist church and Calderglen food bank. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the callous cashline providers are not helping in this scenario, as they are charging people—particularly people in rural poverty who have no means or very limited funds to travel to other areas—to access their own cash, and that those providers are actually exacerbating food poverty and poverty in general?

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point, because I have seen this happening a lot in my own area recently. There are some deprived places in my constituency, and the shops are starting to charge money at the ATMs. It is okay for me—I can walk away and refuse to use that ATM—but I understand that some people are trapped, and instead of getting £10, they are getting £8. It is an absolutely scandalous practice that has to end. That issue could be another huge debate in itself.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman made a very important point about the five-week wait for universal credit payment. Will he confirm that he has constituents like I have in Glasgow South West who are scared to take the advance payment of two weeks’ universal credit because it will only exacerbate their debt?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I know people who worry about borrowing, and try to borrow from their family and friends rather than having to pay back this loan, which I believe also accrues some interest and puts them back even further.

Professor Philip Alston visited the UK back in November, and spoke to volunteers and food bank users as part of his research into poverty in the UK. His report for the United Nations concluded that food banks were a symptom—a symptom of this Government’s complete denial of the impact of austerity on the poorest in society. I hope that the Government will snap out of their denial and start showing willingness to act. I stress that that goes for the Scottish Government as well.

I pay tribute to Labour-led North Lanarkshire Council’s fantastic Club 365 programme, which is free to attend for primary school pupils who receive free school meals, and ensures that they do not go hungry at the weekends or during the school holidays. North Lanarkshire Council
helps to feed our children 365 days a year. I remember attending a meeting that looked at the positive impact of Club 365 on the lives of children in my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, as well as across North Lanarkshire. A Conservative councillor was moved to tears at that meeting; he never realised that the problem was so big.

Club 365 highlights that food poverty can be tackled when the political will exists. I hope that both the UK and Scottish Governments will now show that they have that political will. Let us not make “Oliver” a reality for more of our children: “Please Sir, can I have some more?” I say no more—no more children and their families going hungry in Scotland. If the UK Government can remove the smokescreen of Brexit, and the Scottish Government can remove the distraction of indyref 2, 3, 4 and 5, maybe we can end food poverty.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call the Minister—and I welcome you to the Dispatch Box.

8.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): Thank you for your kind words, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) for securing this debate on this important issue. He is a passionate campaigner on this issue, and he knows me well enough to know that I share his passion for reducing poverty, food insecurity and disadvantage.

I must confess that I have not yet, in the handful of weeks in which I have been in this post, had the opportunity to visit Scotland. I hope to correct that at the earliest available opportunity, perhaps even alongside the hon. Gentleman or a number of the other representatives from Scotland who are here. I am absolutely keen, new in post, to get out and about as much as possible, meeting DWP staff, charities, claimants, vulnerable groups, and, of course, Members of this House to gain a better understanding across the country of what is working well, what is working not so well, and, in the case of the latter, identifying what steps and interventions we need to put in place to tackle all forms of poverty and disadvantage.

I share the concern that has been expressed about what the latest statistics tell us about poverty levels in Scotland and in the UK as a whole. It is absolutely right that any Government are held properly to account for the effectiveness of their policies in tackling poverty and disadvantage. Underpinning this Government’s commitment to tackling all forms of poverty is our firm conviction that delivering a sustainable long-term solution means building a strong economy and having in place a benefits system that works with the tax system and the means building a strong economy and having in place a benefits system that works with the tax system and the

Universal credit is, of course, at the heart of these reforms and will help tackle poverty by helping an extra 200,000 people into work. It is a modern benefit with one monthly payment that adjusts to earnings, avoiding the cliff edges associated with the legacy benefits that it replaces. It will also be £2 billion a year more generous than the previous system. A number of Members across

We are also delivering on our promise to get more people into work in Scotland. Since 2010, employment in Scotland has risen by about 250,000, with unemployment down by 126,000. In fact, Scotland has a lower rate of unemployment, at 3.3%, than the UK national average of 3.9%. Wages are now outstripping inflation—in fact, they are rising at the joint fastest rate in a decade—and about three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work, which evidence shows substantially reduces the risk of poverty.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for the excellent points that he is making. No debate on this subject would be comprehensive without referring to the fact that people with disability are affected more than anyone else in relation to poverty. What more can be done to get people with disability into work and to make sure that they do not fall foul of the benefits system, and certainly do not have to struggle with the benefits system for access to support that they deserve and that the most vulnerable people in society should have?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we do not want anybody, particularly those with a disability, to struggle in accessing our welfare system. I can assure her that I will be working very closely alongside my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work to ensure that our welfare system does deliver in that regard.

Chris Stephens: As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I welcome the Minister to his post. We look forward to questioning him in his current role. If, as he has said, the economy is so strong and wages are so great at the moment, that surely tells us that food prices, and fuel prices, are rising higher than wages. Is that the case, or is he suggesting that food poverty exists for another reason?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I look forward to appearing before the Work and Pensions Committee in due course, and I hope that our relationship will be robust and, no doubt, critically constructive. He raises some good points. I have already set aside time to meet the Scottish National party’s spokesman on these issues, and I also look forward to sitting down with the hon. Gentleman to look at them.

A working-age adult living in a household where every adult is working is about six times less likely to be in relative poverty than one living in a household where nobody works. A child living in a household where every adult is working is about five times less likely to be in relative poverty than a child in a household where nobody works. There is only a 7% chance of a child being in relative poverty if both parents work full time, compared with 66% for two-parent families with only part-time work. We will continue to reform our welfare system, so that it promotes work as the most effective route out of poverty and is fairer to those who receive it and to the taxpayers who pay for it.

We are also delivering on our promise to get more people into work in Scotland. Since 2010, employment in Scotland has risen by about 250,000, with unemployment down by 126,000. In fact, Scotland has a lower rate of unemployment, at 3.3%, than the UK national average of 3.9%. Wages are now outstripping inflation—in fact, they are rising at the joint fastest rate in a decade—and about three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work, which evidence shows substantially reduces the risk of poverty.
the House have raised concerns, and as a Government we have responded to those concerns by making changes to reduce waiting days and make bigger advance payments available. In the last Budget, we announced a £4.5 billion cash boost, which will make a huge difference to the lives of working families and provide extra support for people moving on to universal credit.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for that, but the problem with the advance payment is that it is very much seen as a loan. Is the Department, as it previously indicated to the Work and Pensions Committee, looking at whether the advance payment could become the first payment, which could relieve the reliance on food banks and deal with food poverty?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his further intervention. As I said, we have made improvements to the initial UC assessment period, including the removal of waiting days and advances of up to 100% of the indicative first payment. It is important to say that the advances are 100% interest-free, and people have to pay them back over 12 months; as of 2021, it will be over 16 months. However, he makes a fair point. We need to ensure that claimants are working with their coaches and are absolutely clear about what they are taking on. It is not a loan; it is an advance. We have to ensure that work coaches are advising appropriately and ensuring that options are available to the claimant. They do not have to take it all in one go, for example; they can take a small amount as per their needs at the time. I am willing to discuss that with him in further detail.

I mentioned the concerns that were raised and the changes that were made in the last Budget. In particular, we have put an extra £1.7 billion a year into work allowances, increasing the amount that hard-working families can earn before the taper is applied. That is an extra £630 a year for 2.4 million families, many of them in Scotland.

We are also working in partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland to provide a consistent UK-wide service and assist claimants to successfully make their universal credit claim. The Citizens Advice Help to Claim service offers tailored, practical support to help people make their claim and receive their first full payment on time. That service is available online, over the telephone and face to face through local Citizens Advice services. We are also working closely with the Scottish Government to help them achieve their goals on UC flexibilities. For example, UC Scottish choices are now available to all claimants in Scotland on full service who are not in receipt of a DWP alternative arrangement plan.

No one in the Government wants to see poverty increasing or reported increases in food bank use. The recent poverty statistics are, of course, disappointing. However, child poverty in Scotland has remained the same or decreased across all four of the main measures in the three years to 2017-18, compared with the three years to 2009-10. The statistics published in March this year represent a year—2017-18—when some families struggled to keep pace with rising costs, including a higher level of inflation, which the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) referred to, but since then there has been a year of real wage growth. Earnings have outpaced inflation for 13 months in a row, with real wages growing 1.6% on the year. The statistics do not reflect the substantial additional funding for our welfare system announced in the last financial year, which are only just beginning to take effect.

Increasing the rate of employment is not, however, the limit of our ambition. The Government have gone much further than previous Governments to support working people and have set out their ambition in the Chancellor’s spring statement to end low pay across the UK. UC works alongside other policies introduced by this Government to promote full-time employment as a way out of poverty and towards financial independence. In particular, it offers smooth incentives for people to increase their hours, and we are confident that as UC reaches more working families we will see more working full time.

Our national living wage, which is among the highest in the world, is expected to benefit more than 1.7 million people; and the increase to £8.21 from April this year will increase a full-time worker’s annual pay by more than £2,750 since 2016.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister makes a point about the living wage, but it is not a real living wage as defined by the Living Wage Foundation. Also, it is not available to people under the age of 25. Why does he think that a 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 or 24-year-old in the same job as a 25-year-old is not entitled to the same wage?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She has long campaigned on this issue. The national living wage that we have introduced will make a huge difference, but, referring to the wider point of poverty, I want to be clear that it is not just a Department for Work and Pensions issue. As part of my role, I want to work across the Government with my counterparts in other Departments—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care—to tackle poverty in all its forms. We all have a part to play. I hear what she has to say, and I am happy to meet her at a later stage to discuss that issue at more length.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister says that he will end low pay and increase the living wage. Will he end zero-hours contracts?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The answer is no, because zero-hours contracts work for a large number of people. I have spoken to people in my constituency who find huge benefit in zero-hours contracts. They give them the flexibility that people need in the work place.

Our tax changes will make basic rate taxpayers more than £1,200 better off from April, compared with 2010. Taken together, the most recent changes mean that a single person on the national living wage will, from April, take home over £13,700 a year—£4,500 more than in 2009-10. The Government remain committed to providing a strong safety net for those who need it. This is why we continue to spend more than £95 billion a year on welfare benefits for people of working age. I would say gently to the hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members that the Scottish Government can tackle poverty in all its forms through its devolved skills, education, health and employment programmes such as those introduced to support disadvantaged pupils within the education system. The UK Government...
have also taken similar steps to support the most vulnerable by providing free school meals and our healthy start vouchers. We are also investing up to £26 million in school breakfast clubs and £9 million to provide meals and activities for thousands of disadvantaged children during the summer holidays.

We have also heard from the hon. Gentleman about the impact of food insecurity on health. The UK Government are taking action. For example, chapter 2 of the childhood obesity strategy announces a bold ambition to halve childhood obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030. I will ensure that my counterpart in the Department of Health and Social Care is aware of some of the wider issues that have been raised in this debate. The Government also want to build a better understanding of food insecurity.

**Jim Shannon:** I recently met a representative of a lobby group that, along with Sainsbury’s, is carrying out a project in a number of communities that involves schools, better eating and more careful eating. It is intended to address obesity and to involve young people of five to 15 in activities during the summer months. A great many people out there are doing great things, and sometimes we need to recognise them.

**Will Quince:** The hon. Gentleman is right: we should learn from things that are being done really well across the country and seek to share that best practice. I join him in thanking the organisations that make such a big difference.

**Chris Stephens:** Will the Minister give way?

**Will Quince:** One moment.

As I said, the Government also want to build a better understanding of household food needs, to ensure that we are targeting support at those who need it most. That is why we have worked with the Scottish Government, food insecurity experts and the Office for National Statistics to introduce a new set of food security questions in the family resources survey, starting from April 2019. In future, we will be able to monitor the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity across the UK, and for specific groups, better to understand the drivers of food insecurity and identify which groups are most at risk.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill also spoke about the recent trends in food bank use. I reassure the House that I am very much alive to the issue. I have already had an introductory conversation with the chief executive of the Trussell Trust, and I plan to visit a number of food banks to understand more about the experiences of food bank users. I echo comments made by hon. Members thanking volunteers across our country and those who donate to food banks.

**Chris Stephens:** Will the Minister give way?

**Will Quince:** I want to finish on food banks. My Department is also exploring whether, building on existing good practice, working more closely with food banks can help us to identify and better support any customers who may, for a variety of reasons, not be receiving the full formal support to which they are entitled.

I want to come back on two comments made during this debate. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) asked about those with no recourse to public funds. I hear her point. Those people and how they are supported is a matter for the Home Office, but I will take her point away and have that conversation with my Home Office counterpart.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned pensioner poverty. The percentage of pensioners living in poverty has fallen dramatically over several decades. Relative poverty among pensioners has halved since 1990. The Government will be spending £121.5 billion on benefits for pensioners this year, including £97 billion on the state pension. We are absolutely committed to the triple lock for the rest of this Parliament.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm our view that the long-term approach that we are taking is the right one if we are to deliver lasting change. However, we are not complacent: this is an area of real focus for me and the Department. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House, the devolved Administrations and charities to tackle poverty in all its forms.

**Question put and agreed to.**

8.42 pm

*House adjourned.*
Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

Leaving the EU: Devolution Settlement

1. Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910698]

2. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910699]

3. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910700]

4. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910704]

5. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910706]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to mark the 20th anniversary of the first elections to the Scottish Parliament? Three current Members of this House were elected to that Parliament back in 1999, including me, but, far more importantly, it is a good time to reflect on devolution and the potential of the Holyrood Parliament to improve the lives of the people of Scotland. The UK Government, including my Department, continue to engage in frequent and extensive discussions with the Scottish Government in a number of forums to discuss all aspects related to EU exit. Leaving the EU will of course result in substantially increased powers for the Scottish Parliament.

Pete Wishart: The Secretary of State reinvented history at the weekend when he said: "I reject the...myth that people were told they would stay in the EU if they voted to stay in the UK".

The truth is that Scotland voted to stay within the EU but is being dragged screaming and shouting out of the EU against its national collective will. Better Together in fact said: "What is process for removing our EU citizenship? Voting yes. #scotdecides".

What part of that tweet did he not quite understand?

David Mundell: I was inclined to vote for the hon. Gentleman to succeed your good self, Mr Speaker, before that intemperate question, although I note from his manifesto that he would no longer support independence if he was in your Chair.

I would point the hon. Gentleman to the debate around the EU at the time of the independence referendum, when the former First Minister of Scotland asserted that Scotland would automatically be in the EU as an independent country. That statement proved to be false.

Alan Brown: It is because of nonsense like this and Brexit being imposed on Scotland that many Scots now want a say in their future as regards independence. The Secretary of State’s Government accepted the Scottish National party motion on the Claim of Right, which states that it is the sovereign right of the Scottish people to decide their form of government and their constitutional future. Does he still agree with that principle?

David Mundell: Of course I agree with that principle, but I would point the hon. Gentleman to the recent opinion poll showing that only one in five people in Scotland want another independence referendum before 2021.

Ronnie Cowan: In the four parliamentary elections in Scotland since the 2014 referendum, the people of Scotland have voted overwhelmingly for pro-independence parties. Will the Secretary of State recognise that mandate and support moves for indyref2?

David Mundell: My recollection of the 2017 general election is that the SNP lost 500,000 votes and 21 seats and came within 600 votes of losing another six.

Alison Thewliss: During the Scottish Tory conference, Ruth Davidson told STV that she was getting ready to fight an independence referendum. Is there something the Secretary of State would like to tell us? Has the Tory party finally realised that it cannot deny the people of Scotland their right to have a choice over their own future?

David Mundell: As I myself told that conference, there is only one guaranteed way to get an independence referendum off the table and discussion of independence away from the Scottish Parliament, and that is to elect Ruth Davidson as the First Minister of Scotland. [Laughter.]

Patrick Grady: It’s comedy hour in the House of Commons.

I am not sure whether the Secretary of State fully recognises the implications of accepting the Claim of Right, as he did last year. Can he really believe that
20 years after devolution, once the Brexit process is complete constitutional perfection will have been reached on these islands? Is he really channelling Charles Parnell in reverse and saying to Scotland, “Thus far shalt thou go but no further”? 

David Mundell: I am channelling the Edinburgh agreement, which said we would have an independence referendum in 2014 and that both sides would respect the result.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): As part of our devolution settlement, air passenger duty was devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Act 2016, but yesterday Nicola Sturgeon broke her promise to cut APD. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me and business bodies that this tax disproportionately hits Aberdeen and the north-east and that, despite Derek Mackay trying to blame Westminster, the SNP would be better served arguing against this APD U-turn than arguing for independence?

David Mundell: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that the SNP Government would do better to focus on the domestic issues that are important to the people of Scotland rather than on independence. As we reach this 20th anniversary of devolution, there remains some scepticism about the Scottish Parliament, but I remain very positive about the Parliament; it is the Government in that Parliament who are not delivering for Scotland.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Given the Scottish Government’s failure to take on the welfare powers that have been devolved under the Scotland Act, what confidence has the Secretary of State that they will be able to take on the vast range of powers that will come to them as we leave the European Union?

David Mundell: It is obviously a matter of concern that welfare powers are being delayed, some of them until 2024. However, my hon. Friend may not know that this morning Derek Mackay, the Finance Secretary in the Scottish Government, asked for VAT assignment to be delayed until 2021. It does not seem to me that the Scottish Government are focused on taking on these powers; instead, they are focusing on their independence obsession.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): How much funding for Brexit preparation has been received by the Scottish Government, and how much of that has been passed on to councils in Scotland?

David Mundell: The sum is in the region of £100 million. As far as I am aware, none of it has been directly made over to local government in Scotland, although I am sure that the Brexit Secretary and Mike Russell will discuss that topic when they meet in Edinburgh this morning.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): What really matters to Scotland, and to many parts of the north of England, is the Union of the United Kingdom. Does the Secretary of State agree that initiatives such as the borderlands growth deal can enhance the economic success of the Union? Does he also agree that part of the success of that initiative was due to the work done by MPs, councils and Ministers, and that perhaps the SNP Government could learn something from that?

David Mundell: I commend my hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), the two other Members who were in that first Scottish Parliament back in 1999. I am very aware of the hon. Gentleman’s efforts to promote the highlands in those days. It is a great disappointment to me, given the range of powers that have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament, that this Scottish Government are one of the most centralist Governments in history, seeking to draw power to the centre rather than to devolve it within Scotland.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Now the SNP says that in its independent Scotland we would have a brand-new currency. Does the Secretary of State agree that the people of Scotland do not want a bureau de change at Berwick, and that the people of Stirling still want to use sterling?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree. It is completely ridiculous to suggest that my constituents in Annan should use one currency to get the bus to Carlisle and another currency to get the bus back. This is a ridiculous proposal, and the people of Scotland already see through it.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Two weeks tomorrow the people of Scotland go to the polls, and the Scottish National party will be fighting that election not just resisting the shambles of the Tory Brexit but demanding that the voice of Scotland be heard and the people of Scotland be given a choice over their own future. If my party wins that election, will the Secretary of State abandon his resistance to the Scottish Government being able to consult people on their own future?

David Mundell: I do not know what the hon. Gentleman’s definition of winning that election will be, but that election is to elect Members from Scotland to the European Parliament for as short a period as possible, and that should be the focus of that election.

Tommy Sheppard: That does not answer the question, and it certainly does not sound like the response of someone who believes in the Claim of Right. Is it not
David Mundell: The fundamental issue is that when the people of Scotland determined their own future in the 2014 referendum and voted decisively to remain in the United Kingdom, the hon. Gentleman and his friends did not like the answer, and their position is to keep going—to challenge that result until they get what they want. But I have been very clear: this Government will not agree to another independence referendum before 2021.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, contrary to the manufactured myth of a power grab, on our leaving Europe the Scottish Government will receive significantly more powers?

David Mundell: That is absolutely the case, and the power grab myth has been deconstructed on many occasions. The reality, as we have heard in previous questions, is that significant powers on welfare and VAT are going to the Scottish Parliament, and the Scottish Government are asking for those powers to be delayed.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I share the Secretary of State’s sentiments in reflecting on the second decade of the Scottish Parliament. As someone who has served in both Parliaments he will be well aware of the importance of the Barnett formula, which is the financial mechanism that ensures that the resources of the UK are pooled and shared across each nation based on the needs of the population. In March the UK Government announced the stronger towns fund, which allocates £1.6 billion of funding for towns in England. However, no Barnett consequentials have been announced with respect to Scottish towns. So can the Secretary of State enlighten us on how much Scottish towns will receive from this fund, when they will receive it and who will administer the payments?

David Mundell: An announcement on the Scottish towns fund will be made shortly.

Universal Credit: Low-income Families

4. Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on low-income families of the roll-out of universal credit in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Evidence shows that universal credit is working. We are working closely with the Scottish Government to help them achieve their goals on UC flexibilities. UC Scottish choices are now available to all claimants in Scotland on full service who are not in receipt of a Department for Work and Pensions alternative payment arrangement.

Ruth George: The Scottish choices do not help people to be paid differently if they are receiving less, and Citizens Advice Scotland has raised numerous concerns about the process of migrating on to UC. In one case a 24-year-old single parent was left £90 a week worse off. What are the Government doing to ensure that those on natural migration are aware of their entitlements and do not suffer like that financially?

David Mundell: I am always willing to look into individual cases, and we are working extremely closely with the Scottish Government on their proposals to make the changes they are able to make under the Scotland Act 2016, but of course the Scottish Government are also able to make additional payments to any individual if they choose to do so, but so far they have not chosen to do so.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): First, I would like to associate myself with the comments made in relation to the 20th anniversary of the Scottish Parliament—undoubtedly Labour’s finest achievement. Universal credit is subject to a two-child cap and the subsequent rape clause. In the Scottish Parliament the Tories called it a fair policy; their Scottish leader calls it a “box-ticking exercise”. Can the Secretary of State for Scotland explain why his Government believe it is fair to force the survivors of rape to relive their trauma to claim the support they and their children need?

David Mundell: As the hon. Lady knows, this issue has been debated frequently in this House and in the Scottish Parliament, and the justification for the process has been set out: it is actually to help people in those circumstances. As she knows, the Scottish Parliament has the power to do something different, and if it does not agree with this policy, it could do something different right now. Instead, it is focused on independence rather than on bringing in new welfare arrangements.

Lesley Laird: That is a pathetic response to what really is a callous and cruel policy. The reality is that the right hon. Gentleman’s Government chose this policy; they chose to cut support to the poorest while giving tax cuts to the richest. They say that the best route out of poverty is a job, but under this Government, jobs are paying less than the living wage and often involve zero-hours contracts. At the weekend, Ruth Davidson talked about the Scottish Tories not wanting anyone to be left behind. Can the Secretary of State explain how cutting tax credits for working families and forcing them to go to food banks is not leaving anyone behind?

David Mundell: What a surprising contribution from the hon. Lady—I would have thought that if she believed that, her colleagues in the Scottish Parliament would be advocating it. Instead, we learned recently that Richard Leonard’s keynote policy for Scottish Labour is an NHS pet service.

European Elections: Voter Registration

5. Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of arrangements for voter registration for the forthcoming European parliamentary elections in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I am content that the arrangements are robust. The UK Government have worked to ensure that the “register to vote” website, which has been running since 2014, is secure against malicious attacks and robust enough to manage traffic in line with registration deadlines.
Martin Whitfield: If it is robust enough, how come only 288 of the 2,000 non-UK EU citizens in East Lothian have managed to register? Is that really the foundation of the Secretary of State’s democracy?

David Mundell: If the hon. Gentleman can bring forward details of any citizens who have tried to register but not succeeded in doing so, I will obviously look at that. There have been many campaigns to encourage people to register, and I particularly commend the Daily Record newspaper for its efforts in that regard.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a big advocate of the Prime Minister’s Brexit deal. If he has such great confidence in that deal, why does he not have confidence in the people and allow them to decide whether it is a deal that they want?

David Mundell: The people of Scotland made their decision in 2014; the people of the United Kingdom made their decision in 2016.

Leaving the EU: Devolution Settlement

8. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910707]

9. Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910708]

10. Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910709]

11. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910710]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I refer the hon. Members to my answer to Questions 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7.

Deidre Brock: It has emerged that the polling company Ipsos MORI has been commissioned by the Cabinet Office to conduct polling in Scotland on the state of the Union. That is surely a sign that this Government are deeply rattled by the growing support for independence. Was the Secretary of State made aware of this, and will he support the full publication of this taxpayer-funded polling?

David Mundell: It might surprise the hon. Lady to learn that all Governments, including the Scottish Government, poll on their policies.

Mhairi Black: The Secretary of State asked for context in an earlier answer. The House of Commons Library has a Government-issued leaflet from 2014 explaining why people should vote against Scottish independence. Under the heading “An influential voice in important places”, it says:

“As one of the EU’s ‘big four’ nations, the UK is more able to protect Scottish interests”.

Ruth Davidson herself said that voting no meant that we would stay in the EU. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to get his story straight?

David Mundell: To give the hon. Lady some context, David Cameron made it very clear in 2013 that there would be an EU referendum. The SNP and the former First Minister’s assertion was that Scotland would automatically stay in the EU if it became independent. That was not correct. The question for those advocating a yes in 2014, as it is now, is how an independent Scotland would become a member of the EU.

Brendan O’Hara: Many of us in Argyll and Bute have been trying for a long time to pin down the Secretary of State on this question. Will he now take the opportunity to spell out exactly what he believes the economic benefits will be, specifically for my Argyll and Bute constituency, of ending freedom of movement?

David Mundell: We are engaged in a year-long consultation on the immigration White Paper. I am happy, as part of that consultation and engagement, to come to Argyll and Bute, just as the Home Secretary went to Aberdeenshire last week, to hear what businesses and people there have to say.

Drew Hendry: It was reported at the weekend that the Secretary of State could not even get toast out of a toaster. We cannot get an answer out of him. Are there any circumstances whereby he would support the right of the Scottish people to determine their own future through a referendum?

David Mundell: I support the right of the Scottish people to determine their future through a referendum. They already have—on 18 September 2014, when they voted decisively to remain in the United Kingdom.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): They asked for more powers over welfare and they have delayed them or handed them back to the Department for Work and Pensions; they asked for the power to cut air departure tax and they have U-turned; they asked for power over VAT assignment receipts and they have postponed it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, rather than moaning about all the powers they do not have, Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish Government should get on with using the extensive powers they do have to make the lives of my constituents in East Renfrewshire better?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree. The Scottish Parliament has tremendous potential to make a difference for the people of Scotland, but it will not do so as long as it is bogged down in the SNP’s independence agenda. We hear about further legislation being introduced on that rather than on issues that matter: health, education and transport.
Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): People in Corby are overwhelmingly pro the United Kingdom Union, but voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union. What impact does my right hon. Friend believe that ignoring referendum results and not leaving the European Union would have on the devolution settlement?

David Mundell: I am absolutely clear that the results of both referendums—in 2014 and in 2016—should be honoured. The Government are determined to do so.

Child Poverty

12. Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the level of child poverty in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of issues and we are committed to action that will make a meaningful difference to the lives of disadvantaged children and families. This goes beyond a focus on the safety net of the welfare system to tackle the root causes of poverty and disadvantage. The UK Government will work with the Scottish Government on their child poverty strategy given that this spans both devolved and reserved interests.

Hugh Gaffney: In a recent report, the Resolution Foundation projected that the Scottish child poverty rate will hit 29% by 2023-24—the highest rate in 20 years—and concluded that the Government’s welfare reforms are to blame. Will the Secretary of State take a stand in the Cabinet against policies like the unfair benefit freeze or will he allow more children to fall into poverty?

David Mundell: I do not accept that analysis. Of course there is concern about the number of children in poverty in Scotland, but, as I outlined in my initial answer, the best way to resolve it is for the Scottish Government and the UK Government to work together and focus on a really important issue rather than constantly discuss the constitution.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): While the Secretary of State gives false assurances about child poverty in Scotland, the Trussell Trust tells me that in my constituency it is giving out more and more food parcels to families and children. How is he using his power to ensure families in Scotland are not relying on food banks?

David Mundell: The first thing, as I have outlined in virtually every answer today, is to get the political debate in Scotland off the constitution and on to the issues that really matter to ordinary families. The idea of bringing forward a new independence referendum Bill in the Scottish Parliament, which would take up time when the Scottish Parliament could focus on issues such as this, is the problem right now.

Scotch Whisky: Economic Impact


The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I am very pleased to see how this important sector is thriving. The UK Government are supporting the Scotch whisky success story by freezing duty on spirits again this year. That demonstrates clearly how the UK Government are taking the right decisions on taxes and delivering for the businesses and people of Scotland.

Douglas Ross: The report highlighted that the Scotch whisky industry’s contribution to the UK economy has increased by 10% to £5.5 billion. Due to the UK Government’s welcome announcements, the industry has reinvested £500 million over the past five years in production, distribution and tourism. Does the Secretary of State agree, however, that we can do more to ensure a fairer taxation system for the Scotch whisky industry?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend represents the constituency with the most distilleries in the United Kingdom and is a very powerful advocate for the industry. We consider it to be of very great importance, and we will look at any proposals it cares to bring forward in that regard.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910748] Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 8 May.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This week marks 20 years since the 1999 Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales elections. Two decades on, we remain committed to strengthening devolution within the United Kingdom. As we leave the European Union, we will bring new powers and responsibilities to Holyrood and Cardiff Bay.

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.

Janet Daby: I agree with all the tributes paid by the Prime Minister.

Data from the TUC suggests that 780,000 people are on zero-hours contracts, and that two thirds of them would prefer guaranteed hours. A constituent of mine lives in privately rented accommodation and works two jobs on zero-hours contracts. After getting his third job on a
zero-hours contract, his rent went up. He and his family survive, but only by using a local food bank. Will the Prime Minister end these burning injustices and ban zero-hours contracts?

**The Prime Minister:** The party that recognised the issue with zero-hours contracts was the Conservative party in government. The Labour party did nothing about them; it was the Conservatives that banned exclusive zero-hours contracts.

Q3. [910750] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): School funding is a huge issue on doorsteps in Lewes, because for decades schools in Lewes have had significantly less funding than neighbouring authorities such as Brighton and Hove. Last year, schools in Sussex got a 6% increase in funding, and this year schools such as Priory School in Lewes should be getting a 7.6% increase in their per-pupil funding, but the council is keeping back £64,000 of it. Will the Prime Minister do all she can to ensure that schools get the funding they have been awarded?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We recognised that we have been asking schools to do more and responded with the highest level of school funding on record, and we introduced the new national funding formula to make the distribution fairer; but of course it is still the case that local authorities are responsible for determining individual schools’ budgets from the overall sum they have received. They have a responsibility, and I am sure that hon. Members will take to look at their local authorities to make sure that where schools should be receiving extra money, the local authorities are passing it on. But I will also ask those at the Department for Education, who will have heard my hon. Friend’s question, to write to her in more detail about it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in sending condolences to the family and friends of Guardsman Mathew Talbot, who died while on anti-poaching activities. It is a reminder of the diverse work that the armed forces do, and we thank those who died in the service of Malawi. I join her also in welcoming the birth of the baby to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, and, along with all of us, in recognising and enjoying Ramadan and Vaisakhi at this time. It is important to show the diversity of this country and celebrate all religious festivals.

I hope the whole House will also join me in congratulating a great football team: Manchester City, on winning the women’s FA Cup. In view of Liverpool’s amazing performance last night, perhaps the Prime Minister could take some tips from Jürgen Klopp on how to get a good result in Europe.

Our national health service is our country’s greatest social achievement. Its staff show amazing dedication, but this Government’s failures are taking their toll. An NHS staff survey found that 40% of staff had reported suffering work-related stress in the past year alone. Can the Government explain why staff are being so severely let down by this Government?

**The Prime Minister:** First, may I say to the right hon. Gentleman that when we look at the Liverpool win over Barcelona last night, we see that it shows that when everybody says, “It’s all over and your European opposition have got you beat. The clock’s ticking down, it’s time to concede defeat”, actually we can still secure success if everyone comes together.

The right hon. Gentleman talks down our NHS. Let us just remember this: at the last general election, the Labour party promised to give the NHS less money than the Conservative Government are giving it. The Labour party in government would crash the economy, which would mean less money available for the NHS. And who is the only party in government that has cut funding to the NHS? It is the Labour party.

Jeremy Corbyn: Nobody on this side of the House ever talks down the NHS—it is Labour’s greatest achievement. The principle of healthcare free at the point of need as a human right was a Labour achievement, and every Tory MP voted against it.

Today is World Ovarian Cancer Day. As for all cancers, the early diagnosis of ovarian cancer is essential. In February, almost a quarter of patients waited more than two months to start cancer treatment following a GP referral—the worst performance on record. Will the Prime Minister apologise to the thousands of cancer patients who are enduring weeks of unbelievable stress and worry while they wait to start the treatment that, to have a better chance of survival, they should be able to start quickly after they have been referred?

**The Prime Minister:** We recognise the importance of the early diagnosis and treatment of ovarian cancer, of other cancers and of other conditions as well, which is why a key part of the 10-year plan—the long-term plan for the NHS that is being put forward under this Government—is about early diagnosis. We recognise the importance of that. The right hon. Gentleman might like to reflect on the fact that there is a part of the United Kingdom in which the urgent cancer treatment target has not been met since June 2008. Where is that? In Wales, under Labour.
Jeremy Corbyn: Under the NHS in Wales, more people are surviving cancer than ever before. We should welcome the work that has been done.

The Royal College of Radiologists said, “our workforce projections are increasingly bleak”, and almost half of all women with ovarian cancer reported having to visit the GP three times before they were referred for a test. Today, we learned that GP numbers are experiencing their first sustained fall for 50 years. GPs often play the vital role in the early identification of cancers and other serious problems. Does the Prime Minister think it is acceptable that one third of people who need an urgent GP appointment on the day that they ask for one are being turned away because of the shortage of GPs?

The Prime Minister: We recognise that GPs are a vital part of the NHS, and there are actually more GPs in the NHS today than there were in 2015. We have made it easier for people to access their GPs by ensuring that GP surgeries are open for more days of the week. We are incentivising GP trainees to work in hard-to-recruit areas and making it easier and quicker for qualified doctors to return to the NHS. Under our NHS long-term plan, we will see—for the first time in its 70-year history—the proportion of funding for primary medical and community care increasing as a percentage of the NHS budget. That is because it is this Government who recognise the importance of primary care in our national health service, and it is this Government whose careful management of the economy means there is money available to put into our national health service.

Jeremy Corbyn: Mr Speaker, if you go to any A&E department in the country, you will find that staff are under enormous pressure precisely because there is a shortage of GPs available to see people in the first place. At the same time as he promotes private GP services, the Conservative Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is overseeing the biggest drop in NHS GPs for 50 years. One in 10 GPs are now seeing twice as many patients as is safe for them to see—that is the pressure they are under. The NHS has failed to meet its A&E waiting time target for nearly four years. In March this year, more than one in five patients waited more than four hours to be seen. Will the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Government, apologise to the tens of thousands of people waiting for too long in deep distress just to get seen at an A&E department, because of the pressure A&Es are under?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the importance of these targets in the NHS. That is why one of the elements of the 10-year long-term plan in the NHS—funded by the biggest cash boost in the NHS’s history, which was given by this Conservative Government because of their good management of the economy—is to ensure that we are improving those targets. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would like to stand up and apologise for the fact that the A&E waiting-time target has not been met not for four years, but for over a decade under a Labour Government in Wales.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that, under a Tory Government, spending and investment in the NHS is less than it was under Labour, and, even with the Prime Minister’s funding announcements, that remains the case. The complacent attitude and platitudes hide the reality that, under the Tories, our health service is going through the longest funding squeeze in history; 20,000 jobs in mental health units are unfilled; public satisfaction with GP services is the worst on record; cancer treatment delays are the worst on record; A&E waiting times are the worst on record; and, tragically, infant mortality is rising. Will the Prime Minister admit that the Government have failed the health service, failed NHS staff, and, therefore, failed the patients who rely on the NHS?

The Prime Minister: There are more people alive today because our cancer treatment has improved than would have been the case in 2010. At the previous election, someone said that an extra £7 billion for the NHS would “give our NHS the resources it needs to deliver the best possible care for patients.” I wonder who that was. It was none other than the Leader of the Opposition. Are this Government giving the NHS £7 billion? No! Are they giving it twice that—£14 billion? No! They are giving the NHS £20 billion. I am proud of this Government’s record and the Conservative party’s record on the NHS. It is the Conservative party that is giving the NHS its biggest cash boost in its history. It is the Conservative party that is giving it a sustainable 10-year long-term plan to ensure that it is there for people in the future. Under the Conservative party, we have seen more nurses and more doctors in our national health service dedicated to caring for patients. That is only possible because it is the Conservative Government who manage our economy and manage our public finances. A Labour party in government would crash our economy, meaning less money for the NHS, less money for its staff and less care for its patients.

Q4. [910751] Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): May I join the Prime Minister in congratulating the Duke and Duchess of Sussex on the birth of their son? Was it not wonderful to see Prince Harry bursting with happiness as he shared the news with the nation? I do hope that he will be taking some time off to spend with Meghan and the baby, but statutory paternity leave is just two weeks and take-up of shared parental leave is low. Will my right hon. Friend consider introducing a longer period of paid parental leave just for partners, which will be good for new dads, mums and their children?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue and I thank her for doing so. I recognise the importance of this for many parents. Currently, parents can use the shared parental leave and pay scheme to take up to six months off work together, or to stagger their leave and pay so that one of them is always at home with their child in the first year. We are evaluating the shared parental leave and pay scheme. We want to see how we can improve the system for parents. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy hopes to publish findings on this issue later this year.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I also congratulate the Duke and Duchess of Wessex—[Interruption.] Sussex. We have had 113 days since the Prime Minister’s deal was rejected by Parliament—[Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: Order. Members are rather over-excitable. The right hon. Gentleman’s question must and will be heard.

Ian Blackford: It has been 113 days since the Prime Minister’s deal was rejected by Parliament. A month of Tory talks with Labour, and we are still no further forward. The clock is ticking down and yet the Prime Minister is silent. When exactly will this House have an update from the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I had hoped that the right hon. Gentleman would join me in congratulating the Earl and Countess of Dumbarton on the birth of their child.

We are indeed talking with the Labour party. The public gave this House a very clear message last week—that they want us to get on and deliver Brexit. It is absolutely right that we do so, and we are working on an agreement that can command a majority of this House. If the right hon. Gentleman is so keen for us to get on with delivering Brexit, why did he not vote for the deal in the first place?

Ian Blackford: Scotland does not want a Labour-Tory Brexit stitch-up. Scotland voted to remain, and once again—with no Scottish representation in the talks—our nation is being ignored. Does the Prime Minister think that this is good enough for a supposed Union of equals? She must confirm today that any deal will be put back to the people for a final say.

The Prime Minister: I have had talks with the right hon. Gentleman in the past on the issue of the Brexit deal. I have also discussed the matter with the First Minister of Scotland, and it has been made clear that any discussions on these matters should be with the First Minister. On the question of a second referendum, I remain absolutely of the view, as I have always been—I am not going to change my answer to him—that we should be delivering on the result of the first referendum that took place.

Q10. [910758] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Mr Speaker, the whole House—and, indeed, the nation—knows that you are an Arsenal superfan, but other teams are available. One such team is AFC Fylde, who have reached Wembley once before, but not once, but twice this season. May I ask the Prime Minister to join me in congratulating and wishing them well, not just for their performance on the pitch, but for their excellent work in the schools and prisons in my community, and may I urge the Government to support AFC Fylde in their endeavours?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to congratulate AFC Fylde, who I believe are known as the Coasters, on their recent success. I am happy to confirm that I will indeed join my hon. Friend in congratulating AFC Fylde and the work they are doing there.

Q2. [910749] Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care, and I would like to know when the long-awaited Green Paper on social care will be published. We have been waiting years for this. In January, the Health and Social Care Secretary said that it would happen “before April”. It is now May. Will the Prime Minister tell me when it will finally be available?

The Prime Minister: I commend the hon. Lady for her work on the APPG. We are working on providing the Green Paper on social care. She complains that it has been delayed for a matter of months, but may I remind her that the last Labour Government had 13 years to deliver a sustainable social care system, and they did absolutely nothing?

Q13. [910761] Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that many countries now require petrol to contain 10% ethanol. The effect of that measure in Britain would be a reduction in emissions equivalent to taking 700,000 cars off the road, and it would also secure jobs in the ethanol plants of the north-east of England. Will the Government move swiftly on this environmental measure so that we can have E10 here?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the work that the all-party parliamentary group for British bioethanol is doing on this issue. E10 would help to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but it is not approved for use in all petrol vehicles. Any decision to introduce the new grade of petrol must balance the needs of consumers with the emissions reductions it could help to deliver. We will be publishing our next steps on E10 petrol later in the year. I am sure that the Department for Transport will study with interest the findings of the APPG’s inquiry into the issue.

Q5. [910753] Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Change UK): People are fed up with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition blaming each other and only caring about a Brexit that suits them. Meanwhile, in Enfield, 34,000 children live below the poverty line and face a Brexit future that offers them nothing. Parliament is gridlocked. When will the Prime Minister do the right thing and go back to the country with a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I answered the question about a second referendum earlier and my view has not changed in the few minutes since I did so. I believe that we should deliver on the first referendum. But can I challenge the right hon. Lady on what she said? It is not right that outside the European Union those children have no future. This country has a bright future outside the European Union, and that is the message she should be giving to her constituents.

Q14. [910762] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Today the Government introduce the draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill. Is my right hon. Friend aware of the growing concern at the demolition of the award-winning, listed Richmond House to make way for a permanent replica House of Commons where MPs could be parked for many years? Given that the decant may now be delayed until 2028, will her Government ensure that for reasons of safety we get on with the work
as quickly as possible, and that when a decant becomes necessary it is for as short a time as possible into a temporary, cost-effective Chamber?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend has raised an important issue, because obviously the Palace of Westminster is recognised all over the world as a symbol of democracy, and the decision that was taken by Parliament to approve the restoration and renewal programme was a huge step towards its protection. As he says, we will be introducing the Bill today, and I am pleased that we are able to do that. The decision to move to Richmond House was of course a matter for Parliament. I understand that although Richmond House will be substantially redeveloped, the proposals will retain Richmond Terrace and the Whitehall façade. I am sure that, as he indicated at the end of his question, he will agree with me that it is imperative that Parliament keeps the total bill as low as possible.

**Q6.** [910754] **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): My constituent Carla Cotton struggles with ME and fibromyalgia. Her eight-year-old son has severe hypermobility problems and cannot feed or toilet himself. When his higher rate disability living allowance was stopped last August, Ms Cotton also lost her carers allowance and the severe disabled child element of child tax credit. Her appeal is not set to be heard until the end of this month, and in the meantime her washing machine and oven are set to be taken away for non-payment of debts. What will the Prime Minister do to prevent families waiting for appeals from falling into abject poverty?

**The Prime Minister:** Obviously the hon. Gentleman has set out a very specific case and I will ensure that the Department looks at that case. It is—[Interruption.] I will ensure that the Department looks carefully at the case that he has set out. It is an important issue. The Department for Work and Pensions has been doing work to ensure that appeals can be heard in a timely fashion to give people that confidence and reassurance.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): In the light of last week’s debate in this place and the advice of the Committee on Climate Change, could the Prime Minister indicate whether the Government will be legislating for net zero emissions by 2050?

**The Prime Minister:** I commend my hon. Friend, who is a regular and consistent champion on these issues of environment and climate change. We are looking at the result of the review that was undertaken by the independent committee in relation to our targets for the future. We have, as I am sure she would agree, a good record in our decarbonisation and changes to emissions that we have been undertaking over recent years. We will look very carefully at the report and make a formal response to it in due course.

**Q7.** [910755] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): In Sheffield we have seen youth services cut by 64% as a result of the Government’s austerity agenda. At the same time, we are seeing an increase in knife crime. The report by the APPG on knife crime that was released yesterday highlighted this link across the country. When will the Prime Minister recognise that this is for real and that the decimation of youth services is leaving our young people vulnerable to crime? What will she do to restore these vital services that should be there to support them?

**The Prime Minister:** We recognise the concerns about the level of knife crime. That is why I will be chairing the first serious violence taskforce this afternoon, following the summit we held a few weeks ago, bringing all parts of Government together to ensure that we are putting all efforts into dealing with this issue. Diverse elements need to be addressed, and we need to ensure that we turn young people away from violence. That is being done in various ways across the country, and Government are clear about the need for us to work with local authorities and others across the board to deal with this very difficult issue.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I know the Prime Minister will welcome the news that Asia Bibi, who was persecuted for her faith, is on her way to Canada, which has offered her sanctuary. I think everyone wants to know the Prime Minister’s answer to this question: why did Canada offer sanctuary to Asia Bibi, but the United Kingdom did not? Will future such cases of religious freedom be looked at differently by the United Kingdom?

**The Prime Minister:** I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the reports that Asia Bibi has been able to travel freely and can now make decisions about her future. Our concern was always her safety and security. We were in close contact with the Government of Pakistan and a range of international partners who were considering the offers that would be available to Asia Bibi. Canada made this offer, and we felt it was right and appropriate that we supported that offer. That is important. We have a proud record of welcoming people here who have been persecuted because of their faith, and we will continue that record, but in individual cases like this, it is important for international partners to work together with the key aim constantly of ensuring that the safety, security and best interests of the individual are put first and foremost.

**Q8.** [910756] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): When 12-year-old Zac Gormley, a family friend, is the latest victim of an after-school mugging, and cannot feed or toilet himself. When his higher rate disability living allowance was stopped last August, Ms Cotton also lost her carers allowance and the severe disabled child element of child tax credit. Her appeal is not set to be heard until the end of this month, and in the meantime her washing machine and oven are set to be taken away for non-payment of debts. What will the Prime Minister do to prevent families waiting for appeals from falling into abject poverty?

**The Prime Minister:** As the hon. Lady knows, we are making around £1 billion extra available for police this year, which includes a significant amount of extra money available for the Metropolitan police. Extra money is also being put into violence reduction units in hotspots around the country, including London, to ensure that we deal with the issue of serious violence, which the Government take very seriously and will be dealing with in a number of ways across Departments.

**Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has tried her best. Nobody could fault or doubt her commitment and sense of duty, but she has failed. She has failed to
deliver on her promises. We have lost 1,300 hard-working councillors, and sadly the public no longer trust her to run the Brexit negotiations. Is it not time to step aside and let someone new lead our party, our country and the negotiations?

The Prime Minister: First, may I say to my hon. Friend that I am sorry that we saw so many good Conservative councillors lose their seats last week, often through no fault of their own? I have been a councillor; I know the hard work and dedication that it takes. I have also been a councillor who has stood in an election against a difficult national background under a Conservative Government, so I know what that feels like as well. I thank all those councillors for their hard work, and I congratulate those Conservative councillors who won their seats for the first time across the country. May I also say to my hon. Friend—[Interruption.] No, wait for it. Actually, this is not an issue about me, and it is not an issue about her. If it were an issue about me and how I vote, we would already have left the European Union.

Q9. [910757] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am pleased that the Prime Minister acknowledged, when prompted, the achievements of Liverpool football club. I hope she will also congratulate Sheffield United on their rightful return to the premiership under the inspirational leadership of Chris Wilder.

In March, I brought 14 Sheffield headteachers to meet the Schools Minister and deliver a letter to Downing Street signed by 171 of their colleagues. The reply did not address their concerns that the 8% real-terms cut in funding since 2010 has brought our schools to a tipping point, reducing subject choice, limiting support for special needs and leaving them unable to cope with growing mental health demands. The changes in the national funding formula do not address the crisis, so what will the Prime Minister do to ensure that our children get the education they deserve?

The Prime Minister: At the risk of starting a trend, we have had Liverpool, AFC Fylde and now Sheffield United, and I am happy to congratulate it in the way the hon. Gentleman suggests.

On the issue of education, as I have said, more money is available. We are making more money available in every area for every school. That is what this Government are doing. In his own area, he sees several thousand more children in good and outstanding schools; that is important. The Labour party may talk constantly about the money going into schools, but what matters is the quality of education that children receive. More children in his area in good and outstanding schools, the disadvantage attainment gap narrowed and more disadvantaged young people going to university—that is a good record. It is a record this Government can be proud of.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I, too, congratulate the Duke and Duchess of Sussex? As a former member of the Coldstream Guards, may I pass on my sympathy to the family of Guardsman Mathew Talbot, who has recently been killed?

May I congratulate the new Secretary of State for Defence on her appointment? It is a highly privileged position to be in, and she will be responsible for sending our brave men and women into dangerous positions. To do that, she must gain their respect and get to know them. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is, in itself, a full-time job?

The Prime Minister: First, may I take the opportunity my hon. Friend has given me to commend the former Secretary of State for Defence for his commitment to the armed forces—the men and women of our armed forces?

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, obviously, as Secretary of State for Defence my right hon. Friend will be needing to get to know the men and women of our armed forces. I have to say that I think my right hon. Friend, as a former Minister in the Ministry of Defence and a Royal Naval reservist, starts from a very good position to do that. May I also say to my hon. Friend, on the implication of his question, that there is a lot to be done in our armed forces on the questions of equality? I think my right hon. Friend is absolutely the right person to be dealing with that issue, as well as ensuring that she is speaking up for and promoting the best interests of the brave men and women of all our armed forces.

Q11. [910759] Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Liverpool manager Jürgen Klopp is an optimist, which is why he supports a public vote, and every football fan knows that the biggest prize lies in Europe. There is no stable majority for the Prime Minister’s deal in this place without putting it back to the people, and even the former chair of her party, Eric Pickles, and members of the Euroseptic ERG are now saying the same. Why does she persist in saying that they are all wrong and that she is right; and if she is right, what on earth is her plan?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes out as though I am the only person across this House who thinks we should not have a second referendum. In fact, this House has consistently rejected a second referendum.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the 2017 law requiring everyone in China to co-operate with that communist country’s intelligence services, would it not be naïve to the point of negligence to allow Huawei further to penetrate our critical national infrastructure, and should we not be grateful to all those Ministers, present and former, who have opposed this reckless recommendation?

The Prime Minister: We are taking a robust risk-based approach that is right for our UK market and network and that addresses the UK national security needs. The UK is not considering any options that would put our national security communications at risk, either within the UK or with our closest allies. No one takes national security more seriously than I do, and I say to my right hon. Friend that I think my record speaks for itself.

Q12. [910760] Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op); Labour Members constantly raise the burning injustices that are going unchallenged by this Government—gender inequality, pay inequality and social inequality. Now we see yet another emerging inequality: the Centre for Cities has found that 55% of digital jobs are in the south-east, with just 12% in the north. Is this Prime Minister going to do anything to help to renew our post-industrial northern towns, such as Leigh, with the
emerging digital and cyber sectors, or has the Tory party’s psychodrama killed off any attempt at bringing together the north and the south?

The Prime Minister: It is under this Government that we see the lowest gender pay gap. It is this Government that introduced the race disparity audit, which is, finally, properly shining a light on public services and what is happening for people from different communities. On the issue that the hon. Lady raises about jobs in the digital sector, the industrial strategy deals with AI and digital as one of its grand challenges. The industrial strategy is exactly about ensuring that the economy works for everyone and that the sorts of jobs that she is talking about are available for people across this country.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I was pleased to welcome the Prime Minister to North East Lincolnshire last Friday evening to mark success in the local elections. It is good to know that the Cleethorpes constituency now has two Conservative-controlled unitary authorities. The Prime Minister will recall that the new council leader, Philip Jackson, and I mentioned to her the Greater Grimsby town deal. I know that she will want to push that forward as part of the industrial strategy, which she has just mentioned. Will she agree to facilitate meetings for me and the new council leader to push it forward?

The Prime Minister: I take this further opportunity to congratulate the new leader of North East Lincolnshire, his new councillors and the whole Conservative council group on taking control of North East Lincolnshire last week, and indeed to congratulate my hon. Friend on his work in campaigning to secure that excellent result. He is absolutely right; he and the council leader made that point about the town deal, and I will facilitate meetings between my hon. Friend, the council leader and the Ministers responsible.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I call on the House to celebrate 20 years of devolution, and I look forward to the nation of Wales taking our proper place among the nations of Europe.

Today, 32-year-old Imam Şis of Newport is on his 143rd day of indefinite hunger strike, and the condition of his health is now critical. He is one of many Kurds on hunger strike around the world, including four others in the UK, protesting the treatment of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, who is imprisoned in Turkey and whose human rights are clearly breached by the Turkish Government. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and I, along with 48 other MPs and Welsh Assembly Members, have today written to the Foreign Secretary asking him to apply pressure on Turkey to uphold the human rights of the Kurds. I am confident that the Prime Minister respects the urgency and gravity of the situation. Will she please commit to intervening?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady has raised an important issue. We absolutely expect Turkey to undertake any legal processes against prisoners fairly, transparently and with full respect for the rule of law. That includes ensuring access to appropriate medical treatment. The British ambassador in Ankara has discussed the wider issue of hunger strikes with the Turkish authorities, but we will continue to encourage the Turkish state to uphold the human rights of hunger striking detainees, including access to medical treatment. As the right hon. Lady says, she and others have written to the Foreign Secretary, and I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary addresses the issue urgently.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Our GPs are a very special group of public servants, and it is good news that we have recruited them in record numbers over the last two years. Will the Prime Minister do everything she can to make sure that we look after their job satisfaction, and specifically to help them with the pensions penalty that some of them face in their mid-50s, which is driving some of them out of the profession?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments about GPs. They are indeed a vital part of our NHS—they are the bedrock of our NHS—and that is why, as I indicated earlier in response to the Leader of the Opposition, I think it is so important that the long-term plan includes extra investment in primary and community care. The new, historic five-year contract for general practice announced in January was developed in partnership with the BMA, and it will provide greater certainty for GPs to plan ahead.

Another way in which we can help GPs is by providing funding, which we will see, towards up to 20,000 extra staff in GP practices, helping to free up doctors to spend more time with the patients who need them. As my hon. Friend has indicated, we are committed to recruiting more GPs—an extra 5,000—as soon as possible, and to ensuring that they can maintain their careers and continue to provide services to their patients as they do, day in and day out.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Medomsley detention centre in my constituency was a living hell for the boys and young men sent there from across the UK in the ‘70s and ‘80s. Rape and torture were commonplace. So far, 1,800 men have bravely come forward to say they were affected. Some of those young men reported that abuse decades before the first person was convicted for some of the crimes committed. Nearly a year ago I met the Home Secretary, along with a victim of abuse at Medomsley, to make the case for a public inquiry. Many of the victims are not covered by the inquiry into child sexual abuse because of their age. We need to know what happened at Medomsley. We need justice for survivors and we need to make sure it never happens again. Will the Prime Minister please say that we will have an independent public inquiry into the abuse at Medomsley detention centre?

The Prime Minister: I take very seriously the issue the hon. Lady raises and what happened at Medomsley detention centre. The independent inquiry into child abuse is looking into historical cases of abuse in state institutions. It is doing so on a step-by-step basis in the areas it is looking at. I am surprised at the statement she made that the Medomsley detention centre cases were not able to be covered by that inquiry and I will certainly look at that issue.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Along with Scottish colleagues, I was pleased to welcome the Prime Minister to Aberdeen on Friday. The Prime Minister will be aware that the SNP Scottish Government want to postpone...
devolved VAT powers and delay social security powers, and have U-turned on the air departure tax. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is time for new leadership in Scotland? It is time for Ruth Davidson in Bute House.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. What do we see from the SNP Government in Scotland? We gave them powers over welfare payments, which they asked for—not used. It was an SNP manifesto commitment to cut air passenger duty. They have the power. They are not going to use it. But what are they using? They have used their power to change taxes, so that people doing a job in Scotland are being charged more tax than those doing the same job south of the border. When given the chance to help people, they reject it. When given the chance to take more money out of people’s pockets, they take it. It is certainly time for Ruth Davidson in Bute House.
Iran Nuclear Deal

12.48 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. To ask the Government to make a statement on the status of the Iran nuclear deal.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The UK notes with great concern the statement made by Iran today concerning its commitments under the joint comprehensive plan of action. We are analysing the detail of it and are in close contact with the other parties to the deal. Today’s announcement from Tehran is, I have to say to the House, an unwelcome step. We urge Iran not to take further escalatory steps, and to stand by its commitments. We are not at this stage talking about re-imposing sanctions, but one has to remember that they were lifted in exchange for the nuclear restrictions as part of the JCPOA. Should Iran cease meeting its nuclear commitments, there would of course be consequences, but so long as Iran keeps to its commitments then so too will the United Kingdom. It is critical that we maintain an open dialogue with Iran, and we intend to do so: for example, the Foreign Office’s political director is visiting Tehran this week to discuss this and a range of bilateral issues. I myself hope to visit Iran in the coming months.

We recall our own firm commitments under the deal, including to lift sanctions for the benefit of the Iranian people. The lifting of nuclear-related sanctions is, of course, an essential part of the JCPOA. It aims to have a positive impact not only on trade and economic relations with Iran but, most importantly, on the lives of the many ordinary Iranian people who have had such a tough time over recent decades. We deeply regret the re-imposition of sanctions by the United States following its withdrawal from the JCPOA.

Along with the remaining participants of the JCPOA—Germany, France, Russia and China—we are committed to working on sanctions relief for Iran, together with third countries that are interested in supporting the JCPOA. We are determined to pursue efforts with European and other partners to enable the continuation of legitimate trade with Iran. The UK and our European partners met Iranian officials in Brussels only yesterday to discuss the next steps needed to operationalise the special purpose vehicle, INSTEX—instrument in support of trade exchanges—which aims to facilitate legitimate trade with Iran.

Even at this stage, we encourage all countries, including Russia and China as JCPOA participants, to make their very best efforts to pursue the sanctions relief that the agreement allows for through concrete steps. We take this opportunity to call on all parties that are not party to the JCPOA to refrain from taking any actions that would impede the ability of the remaining parties to fully perform their commitments.

Finally, it is important to remember that the UK remains very clear-eyed about Iran’s destabilising activity in other parts of the middle east—including its ballistic missile programme, which must now be addressed. However, we see that that can best be done through the JCPOA remaining in place.

Mr Baron: It is now a year since the US Government unilaterally withdrew from the joint comprehensive plan of action, better known as the Iranian nuclear deal. The Trump Administration have recently announced the forthcoming expansion of oil sanctions to all countries that buy oil from Iran, and have dispatched an aircraft carrier to the Gulf.

This morning, the Iranian Government announced that they are suspending key parts of the 2015 deal, citing the effect of US sanctions against their economy. Among other actions, Iran has stated that it will keep stocks of enriched uranium and heavy water rather than selling them on the international market, but it has threatened to resume production of enriched uranium in 60 days if the other signatories to the Iran deal—UK, France, China, Germany and Russia—do not plot a way forward to help the Iranian economy to withstand the effects of the US oil and financial sanctions. It does not take me to remind the Minister that reaching the deal took broadly 10 years of diplomacy. At the time, it helped to avert a regional conflict; the House will remember how close the US, the UK and Israel came to military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in 2012. You will remember, Mr Speaker, that I led a Backbench Business debate on the issue at the time, in which I called for more diplomacy and less sabre-rattling. The House should also remember that the United Nations has made it clear that as far as it is concerned, Iran has abided by the deal—this is a unilateral action by the US.

I ask the Minister what else the Government can do to ensure the continuance of this important nuclear non-proliferation treaty, because whatever they are doing is clearly not succeeding at this point. I do not think that I am alone in believing that if the deal fails, there is a real chance of nuclear proliferation across the region. If that happened, I doubt whether there would be any winners in the conflict.

I will add one further point. Yes, we know that Iran is up to no good with some of its other activities in the region—terrorist activities and so forth. In diplomacy, however, going from imperfection to perfection in international relationships cannot be done in one bound; it is a series of small steps. The important thing is to head in the right direction. If the deal is allowed to fail, it will make for conflict in the region and possibly an escalation of nuclear capabilities. That would be bad news not just for the region, but for the world. The Foreign Office has to do more to use its diplomacy with regard to the US.

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the JCPOA is a cornerstone. It is critical for our security, not least because nuclear proliferation in that region of all regions would be calamitous. We therefore remain committed to it—as he rightly points out, it is the result of hard work over more than a decade of diplomacy. In the 18 years that we have been Members of Parliament, he has taken great interest in these matters; I very much respect his thoughtful contributions.

I ask my hon. Friend, and all hon. Members, to be assured that diplomacy continues. I very much hope to go to Tehran shortly, where we have an outstanding ambassador in Rob Macaire. As I pointed out earlier, we are working tirelessly on a mechanism to ensure that trade can continue, and that prosperity can therefore return to Iran; we were doing that in Brussels in the past
24 hours. Continued work is very much on our mind. We believe that the deal is broadly working, and is therefore delivering on its goal to ensure that Iran’s nuclear programme remains exclusively peaceful.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for securing it and for the consistency and clarity of his statements, which go back many years, about the need for peace with Iran.

Today is a deeply sad day for all of us, on all sides, who regarded the Iran nuclear deal as one of the crowning diplomatic achievements of this century and who saw it as opening a door to potential progress on all the other issues on which we have such grave problems with Iran—not least its human rights record. We very much hope for the contrary of what we fear, which is not just that the door to progress has been closed today, but that a very different door is being opened—one that leads us back to the past and to the threat of a new and devastating conflict in an already devastated middle east.

Let us make no mistake. The theocratic wing of the Iranian Government has always wanted the nuclear deal to fail, just as much as Donald Trump and the neo-con hawks who advise him. Frankly, this is not the day— tempting though it is—to berate those who are seemingly destroying the deal and throwing away the prospect of future progress. Today is simply a day to ask what our Government, our European Union and our United Nations can do together to prevent the slide back to confrontation and, eventually, war.

Iran is a country nine times the size of Syria, with a population three and a half times that of Syria before its civil war. Colin Powell’s former top adviser, Lawrence Wilkerson, who helped to create the case for the Iraq war, saw a potential war with Iran as “10 to 15 times worse...in terms of casualties and costs.”

My only question to the Government today is the same question asked by the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay: what practical steps will they now take to get the nuclear deal back on track and avoid descent into a catastrophic new war?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Lady. As she alluded to, it is appropriate, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo here in town to see the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister, to look at the narrow facts rather than try to make a broader political point, although she also did so in her comments.

As I said earlier, we believe that the deal is working and is delivering its goal to ensure that Iran’s nuclear programme remains peaceful. That it is working has been confirmed by consecutive International Atomic Energy Agency reports, the most recent of which was published as recently as 22 February.

We accept that Iran’s nuclear activities must be peaceful, and that it is imperative therefore that it continue to comply with its obligations under the JCPOA. We will do all we can, not just bilaterally but internationally, including at the United Nations. It is interesting, as I pointed out earlier, that both China and Russia understand the grave concerns of the international community about the major and damaging consequences that could come into play.

It was very fair of the right hon. Lady to point out that Iran has been a destabilising influence and remains so—look at Yemen, Lebanon and Gaza, where various proxies are in place—but equally we must work together with diplomacy. A lot of that work goes on quietly behind the scenes. Please be assured that those efforts will continue, not least because destabilisation in the region would have global consequences.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I do not always agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), but he has got this absolutely right, and I commend him for both the question and the way he put it.

The action of Iran today is not particularly unexpected, but it is incontrovertible that it drops at a time of much-heightened rhetoric around the situation between Iran and the US, and in a complex region where the risk of confrontation has now been increased. What appears to be missing is a channel between Washington and Tehran, however private, to start de-escalating some of this rhetoric and, with regard to allies in the region who take strong views on this, to move away from confrontation.

I note that there is a 60-day delay before the Iranians take further action. In a sense, that is an offer to make progress on negotiations. In the talks today between the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and Secretary of State Pompeo, can we start to explore, however privately—the Americans might not be able to say much about it—the urgent need for that direct back-channel link, which needs to be built if we are to move away from what the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) accurately characterised as the possibility of something catastrophic in the not-too-distant future?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He will appreciate that we do not comment directly on intelligence matters, but he will also understand that the discussions today in Downing Street and at the Foreign Office will inevitably touch on this, as well as other important bilateral issues. We share many of the US’s concerns about Iran’s destabilising activities in the region, and although it would not be proper for me to comment on intelligence matters, we will maintain an ongoing and deep conversation on this matter with all parts of the US Administration. As I said, the Foreign Secretary is speaking—at this very moment, I believe—with Secretary of State Pompeo. As was alluded to in the last two questions, it is understood that the US is deploying more military assets to the region. This is a matter for the US, and we share its concerns about Iran’s regional activities, but equally we believe it important to de-escalate many of these tensions.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for securing this urgent question and for his remarks. I agree that we have to note the painstaking diplomacy that led to the agreement.

These latest developments are incredibly concerning to all Members, who are worried about the impact on global and regional security, as the Minister mentioned. If the UK has influence, it must be used to urge the US and Iran to re-engage and, critically, to work towards not just an agreement, but a world free from the appalling weapons of mass destruction. Noting the
remarks of the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), which were considered, as always, I must say with great respect to the Minister, who has an awful lot on his plate, that dysfunction at the heart of Government should not be allowed to spread elsewhere. Does the Minister know when a Minister for the Middle East will be appointed? I say that with respect to him and all the work he has on his plate. What conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with his counterparts in the US and the EU on the need to get an agreement back on track and also to build a stable, nuclear-free world?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his—I think kind—comments. I am perfectly happy being the interim Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, as well as holding the Asia and Pacific brief. He will appreciate that unfortunately we are all rather ensconced here, so travelling out to the far-flung bits of Asia is a bit of a no go, but, with my Foreign Office experience, I have been able to perform these two roles pro tem and I intend to do so to the best of my abilities in the weeks and months ahead.

The Foreign Secretary works closely on these issues with UN and EU partners, and we are actively looking at them. In my first comments, I touched on the work being done on the mechanism to maintain trade, which is an important part of balancing expectations. One of the concerns of many in the Iranian community over the last four years has been that they have not felt that they have had as much as they should have had of the economic benefits flowing from the sacrifices—as they see it—they made on the nuclear programme. We are very keen to keep those benefits intact on a sanctions-free basis. The Foreign Secretary and others in the Foreign Office are spending a lot of time trying to ensure that we get that into play. I think the hon. Gentleman can be assured that the Foreign Office is working very hard on these matters, and we feel that we are able to do so with the resources that we have.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I observe the interest of three notable parliamentary bigwigs—otherwise known as Chairs of Select Committees. What a delicious and inviting choice. I call Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am grateful that the former Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), has made his views clear and shared with the House his, as ever, wise counsel. I welcome the Minister to his place, but I agree, I am afraid, with the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) that, though the Minister does a brilliant job, he himself I know is looking for a bit of extra support, although he gets a lot of support from his parliamentary friends.

How much of this is about an internal debate in Iran and concerned not so much with US relations as with the internal palace coups we have seen involving the mullahs, the elected Government, the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij militias? The country is falling apart. There is a youth movement challenging authority in a way not seen in the 40 years since the Revolutionary Guard established this extraordinary tyranny. We are seeing a fundamental change in the structure of what should be one of the greatest and most prosperous countries in the region. What is the Minister doing to encourage those for whom liberty is an opportunity and who do not see control as the only vector through which order can be established?

Mark Field: I will take that as a job application and will see that it is passed on to No. 10 Downing Street and the Chief Whip. I also had a whisper in my ear just then. It is only fair that I mention the great team of Parliamentary Private Secretaries and others who provide certain assistance on these matters. I have to keep in their good books at the best of times.

My hon. Friend makes some very wise and important points. It is probably unwise to speculate about the stability of a regime—no doubt there have been predictions in the last 40 years about the stability of the Iranian regime—but he makes a valid point. This is a country at the heart of the region. It is a country of 65 to 70 million people and is a hugely important player, but it is not fulfilling its potential, in terms of prosperity, for its people, in spite of its great assets both capital and human. We would obviously like to see a more stable Iran and Iranian Government. As I said, it would be unwise to make too many predictions at our end, but it is fair to say there is instability within the regime, although it is difficult to predict where that will lead. Suffice it to say that we view the JCPOA in all its facets—not just nuclear disarmament, but its economic aspects—as a cornerstone of the continued co-operation between our countries.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The Iranian nuclear deal is imperfect, but it is a significant achievement that helps to make our world safer, and it is too important for us to let it unravel. A key pressure point is obviously the soaring inflation that is hitting ordinary Iranians hard, although, as the Minister says, Iran has kept to its side of the bargain. What can the Government do to help to mitigate the effects of the reckless and short-sighted US sanctions on ordinary Iranian people, and to help to de-escalate the situation and get the deal back on track?

Mark Field: While I broadly agree with the hon. Lady, I think it fair to say that the destabilising impact of Iran in that region is not exactly part and parcel of the bargain either. We have had debates and urgent questions about what is happening in Yemen, Gaza, Lebanon and, of course, Syria, where Iran’s influence has been profound, and we obviously have concerns about that destabilising influence. So things are a little more complicated that the hon. Lady has suggested.

We feel that the JCPOA is the only game in town. That is why, although the US has pulled out of it, we are determined to ensure that we remain actively engaged. As the hon. Lady said, the sanctions relief is the key incentive for Iran to remain bound by the restriction of its nuclear programme, which is why we are so keen to get the special purpose vehicle, INSTEX, in place at the earliest opportunity. It is not yet operational, but the E3—France, Germany and ourselves—are working to address all the technical and legal aspects required to make it operational, and once it is up and running, there will be great trade benefits.
[Mark Field]

There is genuine debate within Iran—we have no doubt about that—and we therefore feel that it is very important for the UK, with our partners, to engage through diplomatic channels, with the support of those who have a brighter future in mind for that country.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the vital importance of the intelligence arrangements that we share with the United States, in the context of this particular crucial and worrying situation, will the Minister encourage the Foreign Secretary to persevere in his attempts to make sense prevail in the Cabinet, so that our intelligence relationships with the US and other Five Eyes allies are not put at risk by cosying up to the communist Chinese Government for short-sighted commercial reasons?

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend and I have had many happy times in our five years together on the Intelligence and Security Committee, and have discussed a range of these matters. As he will know, intelligence issues should not be discussed on the Floor of the House, but he has made his view clear, and I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary is made well aware of it.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary is currently meeting the US Secretary of State, Mr Pompeo. What conversations are taking place about Germany? Is Mr Pompeo being encouraged to go back to plan A, which was to visit Germany and speak to his German counterpart—given that Germany was a key partner in the original JCPOA—so that we can form a united front in tackling the crucial question of nuclear disarmament?

Mark Field: I very much hope that Secretary of State Pompeo will be able to visit Germany at the earliest opportunity, or indeed to engage in high-level meetings with his German counterpart, whether at the United Nations in New York or elsewhere. In fairness, I think that he rearranged his programme very late in the day. It was considered important for him to be in Iraq to gain an understanding of what was happening on the ground in Iran, so his programme was reorganised at fairly short notice, but we will ensure that those heartfelt concerns are passed on.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I certainly agree with the Minister that this development is extremely unwelcome, and that there is now a need for calm and for judgment. He mentioned legitimate trade. He will be aware that a significant number of jobs, both here and in Iran, have been created through various trade deals, which is obviously in the interests of both countries. Will he say a bit more about what he is doing to support the role of the INSTEX special purpose vehicle that will be set up under sanctions relief to encourage more legitimate trade?

Mark Field: Let me first thank my hon. Friend for all the hugely important work that he does. He is our trade envoy to Libya, which is obviously a difficult role, but in the past he was our Minister for Africa in the Foreign Office, and I know that his contribution there is remembered very fondly.

My hon. Friend has made a good point about the special purpose vehicle, which is important because it will ensure that we see genuine and lasting sanctions relief. The SPV is designed to facilitate legitimate trade under both European and international law. Its immediate focus will understandably be on the facilitation of trade where the immediate needs of the Iranian people are greatest—the humanitarian needs for foodstuffs, agricultural products, pharmaceuticals and trade in consumer goods. That will obviously have an impact on UK companies wishing to trade with Iran, as well as benefiting the Iranian people. The UK, France and Germany are the initial owners and shareholders of the SPV, but we are working with other interested EU member countries that may also wish to play a formal role in these initiatives.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The millions of young people in Iran who have suffered under the oppressive theocratic regime were hopeful that the JCPOA would lead to an easing of sanctions, which would in turn lead to economic benefits, but because of the incompetence and corruption of the regime, that easing of sanctions has not had the economic impact for which they hoped. Can we send a clear message to the people of Iran that if we have to re-impose sanctions because their regime broke its word, we will not be acting against the Iranian people, and that we look forward to the day when they will be able to choose their Government freely?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman has, perhaps, used slightly less diplomatic language than I might have used, but I think that the message to the Iranian people from all of us here is loud and clear: “We are very much on your side.” Iran remains a priority country for the UK in relation to its human rights situation, to which he alluded. On 15 November, the UN General Assembly Third Committee approved a resolution, co-sponsored by the UK, which urged Iran to address a long list of human rights violations, including the widespread use of arbitrary detention. We very much want to see a move towards democracy and all the opportunities that that will provide for all Iranians, not only in human rights but in the broader arena of prosperity.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I hesitate to disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), especially after he sponsored my swim in aid of my local hospital, but I have to say that when this agreement was reached, it was understood that Iran would stop supporting and funding Hezbollah and Hamas. Far from that being the case, support for Hamas, Hezbollah and other terrorist groups—which is also causing instability in the middle east—has increased to a major extent. May I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to take those matters into consideration when dealing with Iran? I actually think that the sanctions for which the Americans have opted are the right way forward.

Mark Field: I understand that my right hon. Friend swam a long way—I am a non-swimmer myself—and raised a lot of money. I hope that in the two neighbouring parts of Essex he and our hon. Friend will be successful. Friend will be sinking rather than swimming. [Interruption.] I think I got that the wrong way round. I meant “swimming rather than sinking”. [Interruption.] I always thought I would be the straight man in the Foreign Office—that was certainly the case with the last Foreign Secretary.
As my right hon. Friend knows, he and I disagree slightly on this matter. We feel that the JCPOA is the only game in town. We feel that, broadly speaking, it has worked, and we wish to see it work. I know that my right hon. Friend takes a different, albeit very principled, view, but we will continue to do all we can to ensure that the JCPOA succeeds in its own terms.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Obviously the risk of an escalation in the middle east will be significant if Iran decides to resume its nuclear programme. What is the Minister doing to address the risk of a further escalation, with responses from Saudi Arabia and also Israel, and a potential arms race in the middle east?

Mark Field: I understand why the hon. Gentleman asks that. Clearly we want to de-escalate tensions in the region, so he will also understand why it would be unwise of me to speculate further at the Dispatch Box.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): No one wants nuclear proliferation in the middle east; anyone who does would have to be mad, and not even the so-called neo-cons in America want that. Can my right hon. Friend tell me why the Americans pulled out of this deal? I assume their decision was based on intelligence; have the British Government received that intelligence and do they agree with it, and if so why are we still pursuing this deal?

Mark Field: As my right hon. Friend will understand, for obvious reasons I am not going to make any comment on intelligence-related matters. There was a concern at the time: the Trump Administration's view was that it was a bad deal for the US, and it had of course been negotiated by the previous Administration. Let me restate our view: we urge Iran not to take any escalatory steps and to continue to meet its commitments under the deal, but while Iran is in full compliance we shall remain fully committed to the JCPOA, and I know that position is shared by the French and Germans.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Can the Minister reassure the House that the British Government will continue throughout the stages of this crisis to align with France and Germany as opposed to the US Administration, who seem intent on escalating the situation?

Mark Field: I very much hope the US is not intent on escalating this, and I hope we will come to an agreement with all our close allies in this region. We are working very closely with the EU3, two members of which are on the Security Council: Germany is on it this year and next and France, like us, is a permanent member. We will continue to do so, but we would very much like to see the American Administration also supporting many of the aims, which are the only positive realistic route forward and would be good not just for the Iranian people but for the region as a whole.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I listen to this ongoing story of Iran and nuclear proliferation with a chill for fear of where it might lead, which is why I have stayed in the Chamber today. We have to put a stop to this. Does my right hon. Friend agree that strength can come from working with the remaining partners in the JCPOA and that through them we must ensure this plan remains in place, and also that we must, working jointly through them, put pressure on the US to deal with its sanctions and potentially remove them?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. It is worth remembering that Iran's ballistic missile programme is a great threat to the security not just of the middle east but of Europe, and that cannot be ignored. We will continue to urge Iran to abide by all relevant UN Security Council resolutions. We call upon all parties to report to the UN activities inconsistent with the resolutions, and we will continue to keep the pressure up.

Joaquin Ryan (Enfield North) (Change UK): Iran's actions announced today are highly regrettable and are the inevitable consequence of President Trump's decision last year. However, I echo what the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) said and say to the Minister that if, as it says, the Iranian regime wants to negotiate new terms it must also address its support for terror groups such as Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which together fired some 700 rockets, missiles and mortars indiscriminately at Israel from Gaza last weekend, killing four people. It is not acceptable to leave out the ending of that kind of behaviour if new terms are being demanded.

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. We first came across each other 22 years ago this week, but in a different context, as some will know. [Interruption.] For the avoidance of doubt for the rest of the House, she beat me in the 1997 election—and look where we have both ended up; isn't it terrible?

The right hon. Lady makes a serious point, and we were also deeply upset by the death of those four Israeli civilians last weekend and very worried about the potential for escalation. Thankfully, I think wise voices have ensured that that has not happened. She makes a good point, as I said, and a concern we have, shared by some in the US Administration, is that Iran being an ongoing destabilising influence in the region is not compatible with sanctions being lifted.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The JCPOA is headed entirely in the direction many of us told the Government it would be, and for me what is most disappointing is the millions of people in Iran whose future has been destroyed, and also the people in countries including Syria, Lebanon and Yemen who have been killed as a result of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and others taking the money released from the change in sanctions and putting it into death and destruction in the middle east. That has resulted in a destabilised middle east and a breakdown in international diplomacy. Importantly, we should now take the lead of Secretary Pompeo and say, “Let's reopen this negotiation.” We should look not only at human rights in Iran and economic development in Iran, but at what the Iranian regime is doing with regard to its people and its future nuclear capability.

Mark Field: I disagree with my hon. Friend. I think the JCPOA has been an important attempt at least to try to bring stability to the region. The region was not
stable before the JCPOA was negotiated between 2005 and 2015. We believe not just that the deal is based on trust about Iran’s intentions, but that it provides for rigorous verification and monitoring that allows the International Atomic Energy Agency access to Iran’s nuclear programme, and in return we want to see some economic sanctions being lifted. I understand the concerns my hon. Friend has raised, but it would be wrong to think we could either walk away from this plan of action or feel that it is open for fundamental renegotiation, and I do not think that would be practical diplomatic politics either.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): But it is important to be clear about Iran’s “destabilising influence”, which the Minister euphemistically and diplomatically talked about. This is a regime that has been propping up the butchery of Assad, funding Hamas on an ongoing basis in killing Israelis with the intention of wiping them off the map and killing their own Palestinians, and funding the terror of the Houthis in Yemen. These are not inconvenient side issues not to be mentioned in the House; they actually show how deadly dangerous it would be if Iran were able to realise the long-held ambitions of some in the regime to hold the bomb. So I would like to hear a little more vigour from the Government about what they will do to make sure that sanctions and consequences are re-imposed, and I would like them to say that they will do whatever it takes to stop Iran getting a nuclear bomb.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is right; he suggests I was being euphemistic, but I spelled out exactly where we have concerns. Those concerns have been raised by Members in all parts of the House and no doubt will continue to be raised; these are very live issues whether in Gaza or Lebanon, or indeed Yemen or Syria. We clearly feel that an escalation at this stage as a result of what Iran is proposing to do is precisely the wrong way forward, and we want to find every opportunity to utilise whatever diplomatic weapons we can. That involves acting internationally at the UN, with our EU partners and elsewhere. We will continue to make those efforts, because the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it would be a calamitous escalation if there were any opportunity for Iran to restore and renew its nuclear capabilities.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Putting aside whether the nuclear deal should be dealt with separately from or in conjunction with Iran’s aggressive behaviour in the wider region, my specific question to the Minister is as follows. He talked about Iran’s profound negative influence in the region, whether in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain or Lebanon—and Morocco recently expelled the Iranian ambassador. The UK holds the pen on Yemen at the UN and knows about Iran’s aggressive behaviour in the region; what specifically will the UK with its partners be doing to check that Iranian aggressive behaviour in the region?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We have only this morning received the letter from Rouhani, and we will reply to it. Fundamentally, we are urging Iran not to take escalatory steps, but to continue to meet all its commitments under the deal and indeed any broader commitments reflecting a country that wants to co-operate with others in the region and internationally. It is too early to talk about the direct consequences, but we are clear that our commitment to the JCPOA requires the full compliance of its obligations by Iran.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): This situation shows the importance of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office having stronger teams engaged in international treaties in the area of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Can the Minister reassure me that that is the case, and that even though we want to work together with Iran to ensure that the treaty works in the long term, that will not dissuade us from taking up matters such as human rights, the persecution of minorities in Iran and individuals who are being unjustly detained there?

Mark Field: I can give my hon. Friend a full assurance on that. He makes a good point. It is important, particularly in—dare I say it—a post-Brexit world, that this country should engage as far as it can with a range of international organisations, including the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organisation, to name but three. On the issue of human rights, the interactive dialogue with the special rapporteur for human rights in Iran took place as recently as 11 March, and the UK’s statement raised concerns about the judicial harassment of human rights defenders, the death penalty for child offenders under the age of 18 and the limits that are placed on freedom of expression, religion and belief. We continue to make those concerns very clear. The Foreign Secretary publicly shared his concerns about the sentencing of Nasrin Sotoudeh on 12 March, and we will regularly raise human rights issues with the Iranian Government at all levels and urge them to cease the harassment and arbitrary detention of all human rights defenders.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Minister has given the House a comprehensive list of important international organisations with which the UK must engage. May I add NATO to that list? What conversations has he had recently with our NATO allies with regard to the agreement?

Mark Field: My list was obviously not entirely comprehensive. My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I look forward to meeting him again in Westminster Hall this afternoon when we shall talk about West Papua in Indonesia. NATO is important, and what is happening in Iran and the potential for escalation on the nuclear side obviously have strong defence implications, so yes, NATO will very much be added to the list of organisations with which we will seek to engage on this globally important matter.
Point of Order

1.32 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During last week’s Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions, the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) told me in reply to a question about solar that the UK had installed “more than twice as much solar capacity as any other European country—more than Germany, France and Australia combined.”—[Official Report, 30 April 2019; Vol. 659, c. 105.]

Even if he meant Austria, rather than Australia, he is wrong either way. Germany alone has 46 GW of solar; the UK has only 13 GW. Germany, France and Austria together have four times the UK capacity at 56 GW, and Australia has 65 GW, which is five times the UK capacity. It seems that the joint Minister of State has failed on both Energy and Education. Mr Speaker, can I get your advice on how to bring the Minister back to the House to correct the record on this matter?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The answer to him is that responsibility for the veracity of statements made in this Chamber lies with each individual hon. and right hon. Member. The question of whether an error has been made that has caused the House to be misled is a matter not for adjudication by the Chair but for the judgment of individual colleagues. I feel sure that the contents of the hon. Gentleman’s point of order will shortly be winging their way to the Minister, and if he judges that he has made a mistake, I feel sure that he will consider himself honour bound to correct the record. There are a number of ways in which he can do that. He could return to the Chamber specifically to attend to the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I would not wish to encourage the hon. Gentleman to hold his breath. We will leave it there, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman feels that he has found his own salvation. The smiling countenance that he now shows to the House suggests that that is so.

BILf PRESENTED

PARLIAMENTARY BUILDINGS
(RESTORATION AND RENEWAL) Bill

Andrea Leadsom, supported by the Prime Minister, David Lidington, Secretary James Brokenshire, Secretary Jeremy Wright, Secretary Chris Grayling, Secretary Rory Stewart, Elizabeth Truss, Kevin Foster, Michael Ellis, Sir Patrick McLoughlin and Valerie Vaz presented a Bill to make provision in connection with works for or in connection with the restoration of the Palace of Westminster and other works relating to the Parliamentary Estate; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 388) with explanatory notes (Bill 388-EN).

Mr Speaker: We come now to the ten-minute rule Bill, and the House will have noted the display of sisterly solidarity as I call Angela Eagle to move the motion.

Pension Charges

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

1.35 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require pension providers to publish standardised information on charges for pension products; to make provision for a cap on such charges; and for connected purposes.

My Bill will introduce greater transparency in the charges applied to pension savings by those who manage them on behalf of the beneficiaries, and introduce a mandatory cap on such charges.

The aim of the Bill is threefold: to drive down significantly the total cost of pension fund management; to achieve better value for money in what is currently a failing market; and to ensure that a higher proportion of pension savings will actually go to help the beneficiaries to achieve a comfortable retirement.

Currently, far too much of people’s hard-earned savings is being siphoned off in hidden charges and costs, and without firmer Government intervention this is likely to get worse rather than better. As a former pensions Minister, no one knows better than me how quickly eyes can glaze over at the merest mention of this subject, but the wellbeing of our society demands that we get this right. Currently, 34 million of our fellow citizens are either paying into or benefiting from pension savings, and the welcome introduction of automatic enrolment has brought millions more into workplace pensions saving for the first time. The automatic nature of this saving means that there is a special duty on the Government to ensure that funds accrued in this way are used to generate pension benefits for savers rather than profits for fund managers and intermediaries.

Despite the welcome cap of 0.75% on costs in these pension funds, it is clear that much more needs to be done. All the evidence demonstrates that this is a failing market. It suffers from information asymmetry for both customers and regulators, it is characterised by very weak if not entirely dysfunctional price signals, and one of its most revealing features is persistent and very high profits for those who supply services, which is the classic sign of market failure.

The pensions being offered are complex by design. Providers are being allowed to conceal many hidden charges that eat away at the individual pension pots in defined contribution schemes, under the noses of their clients. One particular pension product was discovered by consumer champions Which? to contain 44 different charges that could be levied on the fund. Price signals are weak because small, innocuous-looking fee levels can eat up massive amounts of an individual’s savings over time. As the Royal Society of Arts study led by David Pitt-Watson demonstrated in 2012, an annual fee of 1.5% can eat up a massive one third of a pension pot in 25 years.

Despite there being billions of pounds of savers’ money under management, it is not yet possible for any individual workplace saver to find out how much it actually costs them to be a member of their pension scheme. Let alone to be able to compare these costs with those levied in other schemes. Thus, astonishingly, when it comes to pension saving it is currently completely impossible to assess the cost of any one scheme against
another. It is impossible to make any estimate of what the value for money of any particular scheme will be, yet this decision is crucial to an individual’s future wellbeing and prosperity. Those 13.5 million members now automatically enrolled in defined contribution schemes are trapped in an employer-chosen fund where their only choice is whether to stay or to leave and forgo the valuable employer contribution. That is surely the definition of Hobson’s choice. In reality, it is no choice at all. It is no wonder that the Office of Fair Trading pronounced the pensions market for buyers to be “one of the weakest” that it had analysed “in recent years.” The answer to that problem is not more complexity and faux competition, but transparency of total costs and fees. There should also be a cap on charges.

Necessary transparency can be achieved only if charges and costs are comparable and easily understood across the sector. A mandatory cost disclosure framework defining how to calculate such costs is therefore vital. The results must then be a prominent part of the statements sent to every saver annually. My Bill would mandate transparency across the board on pensions charges by introducing a mandatory cost disclosure framework with independent verification. It would also establish a cap on charges during the accumulation stage of pension saving and crucially extend that to the decumulation stage, when the pension savings made are actually taken.

Pension products should quickly become more standardised and simplified, as they are in the Netherlands, where this reform has already been successfully introduced. In the Dutch case, introducing transparency led to an immediate and huge 31% fall in the cost of managing pensions per scheme. The beneficial impact for savers cannot be overestimated. Just as small increases in costs can eat up large amounts of a pension pot or fund over time, so small cost savings can lead to a huge improvement in fund size over the same period. Dutch regulators calculated that a cost reduction of only 0.25% would result in a massive 7.5% increase in collective pension assets over 40 years. Just think of the benefit that would accrue to all savers from a 31% fall in fund costs should that be achieved here in the UK.

My Bill aims to enable pension savers, rather than fund managers, to accrue a much higher proportion of the benefits generated over time by saving into a pension fund. Such practical and meaningful transparency also enables trustees to pursue their fiduciary duty much more effectively to achieve value for money for the beneficiaries. That makes them potentially a much more effective force for good.

Caps on costs also have a vital role to play in delivering better value for pension savers, which is why the Bill extends their use far wider than is currently allowed.

As Unison pointed out in evidence to the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, 90% of total costs paid by pension funds are linked to asset management. Asset managers are making record profits, but analysis demonstrates that this is rarely as a result of high performance outcomes.

As I mentioned earlier, in the case of auto-enrolment, a cap of 0.75% has been introduced. That was predictably opposed by fund managers and there was a shift from active to passive fund management as a result. The outcome was that funds that tracked the market passively made better returns than those that had actively invested and charged far higher fees. Evidence demonstrates that both actively and passively managed funds did not outperform their benchmarks when fees and charges were taken into account. In my view, that shows the urgent need for caps on charges.

The advent of so-called “pension freedoms”, which allow savers access to their money early, has created even more fertile ground for pensioner rip-offs. Yet there is no transparency and no caps are applied in circumstances of early drawdown. The cost of drawdown products, which now proliferate, needs to be included in moves to establish transparency and cap costs.

In 2016-17, £15.3 billion was removed early from pension savings—three times more than in the previous year, yet research by Which? has discovered wildly different charging structures and costs associated with the supply of those drawdown products. The highest prices are charged by some of the best-known providers, including by levying heavy fixed fees, set-up charges, administration charges and more general rip-off prices, exploiting the trust in a good brand name. That dubious practice would not survive price transparency and charge caps on drawdown products.

The Bill will mandate cost transparency and caps on charges to drive down cost and drive up value for money for pension savers. It is a timely and necessary reform. Without this further regulation, we will let down millions of pension savers and provide an ongoing bonanza of unjustifyably high profits for fund managers and intermediaries who exploit their power in a complex and failing market.

The time for the Bill is now and I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

Ordered,

That Ms Angela Eagle, Maria Eagle, Debbie Abrahams, Stella Creasy, Ruth George, Tonia Antoniazzi, Rosie Cooper, Marsha De Cordova, Jack Dromey and Liz Twist present the Bill.

Ms Angela Eagle accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 389).*
Opposition Day

[UN-ALLOTTED HALF DAY]

TV Licences for Over-75s

1.46 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to honour the Conservative party’s 2017 manifesto promise to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s for the duration of this Parliament by ensuring sufficient funding to do so and, should the BBC propose changes to the concession, to ensure that the proposed changes are subject to parliamentary consent.

The motion is in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, me and others, including the leader of the Liberal Democrats and the leader of the SNP.

The debate is about keeping a promise that the Conservative party made on page 66 of its election manifesto just two years ago. In case the Minister has not got a copy, I have managed to find a rare one, which was not shredded, in the Library. It makes for interesting reading. It is called “Forward Together” and claims to be a “Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future”. On page 66, it states:

“We will maintain all other pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this Parliament.”

No equivocation, no ambiguity—the Conservative party promised to maintain free TV licences for the duration of this Parliament. Yet we are here today because that promise lies in tatters: 4.5 million older people in receipt of free TV licences could be betrayed unless the Government act.

For many older people, their free TV licence staves off poverty, isolation and loneliness all in one go.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend will recall that last week I asked the Prime Minister a question about TV licences and bus passes, and got an extremely vague answer. More importantly, when that manifesto was drawn up, the Prime Minister and the Government already knew that they had handed over responsibility to the BBC. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a deception on pensioners, but that at least we knew what was happening?

Tom Watson: I agree, and I will come to loneliness a little later. Thankfully, the pensioners of Slough saw through the ambiguity of that manifesto and voted for my hon. Friend in the last election. We are very proud of his campaigning for pensioners.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Government claim to care about loneliness, but the issue of TV licences is a significant worry for my over-75 population. It is within the Government’s gift to say that they will protect the free TV licence for over-75s. Does my hon. Friend agree that they should end their prevarication and do that today?

Tom Watson: I do. The Government’s commitment to my hon. Friend’s constituents was very clear: they promised that free TV licences would last for the duration of this Parliament. We are seeking to get the Minister to honour that promise.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Government are reneging not on a two-year pledge but on a 22-year pledge. When the Bill that introduced free TV licences went through the House of Commons, the then Opposition spokesman—Peter Ainsworth, Member for East Surrey—said:

“The Government will no doubt be interested to know whether the Opposition support the granting of free television licences to those over 75. In anticipation of that question, let me say at the outset that of course we give an enthusiastic welcome to any sensible measure that alleviates the burden of the licence fee on the elderly.”—[Official Report, 10 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 122.]

It is a 22-year rip-up by the Government, not a two-year one.

Tom Watson: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. He was part of the pioneering Government that gave this concession to pensioners because we believe that they deserve dignity in retirement and reward for their hard work and for paying their taxes.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This pattern is becoming more and more prevalent in the Government. They are outsourcing responsibility for decisions, including council cuts and police cuts, to other institutions. Is that not indicative of a lack of leadership on the Government Benches?

Tom Watson: I am afraid it is, but in this case there is also the issue of a broken manifesto promise. We seek to expose that today and persuade the Minister that it is not too late to change her mind on this policy.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Almost 7,000 people in my area would lose the concession, were it to go. Does my hon. Friend agree that the over £1 million of costs to pensioners would take money out of already poor pockets? It is thus a double-whammy if the Government do not stick to their manifesto commitment.

Loneliness is an increasing problem for millions in our country, with four out of 10 people saying that television is their main source of company. Does my hon. Friend agree that cutting free TV licences will merely exacerbate the national loneliness crisis?
Tom Watson: I agree: it is the most vulnerable and loneliest who will be affected if this policy is implemented. That is why we called this debate.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. In principle, should a multimillionaire receive a free TV licence?

Tom Watson: If we believe in universal benefits and that people who have paid into the Exchequer over their working lives are entitled to benefits, then yes. I hope the hon. Gentleman believes that his party should stick to its manifesto pledges.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way. He mentions the impact on the vulnerable. My constituent Elizabeth Tombling, who is 95 years old, says that her TV licence is one of the few bits of pleasure she has in her old age, particularly as she is housebound. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is unfair on her?

Tom Watson: It is not fair on my hon. Friend’s constituent and the many hundreds of thousands of other pensioners who will lose out. Very often, it is the most vulnerable and the loneliest pensioners who depend on the free TV licence.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tom Watson: I will give way for the last time, and then I will make some progress.

Jack Dromey: The great pensioner champion, Jack Jones, once made a speech in which he said that one in five of the over-70s never sees anyone from one week to the next; the television is their friend. Jack thought that a generation of progress would never be reversed. Does my hon. Friend agree that those great pioneers of the pensioners movement would be turning in their graves at the thought that the free TV licence might be taken away from them?

Tom Watson: What a great campaigner Jack Jones was. I thank my hon. Friend for raising his contribution. His legacy is the National Pensioners Convention, which is solidly against these proposals. I am sure we will talk about it later in the debate.

That is why the Government’s refusal to honour their manifesto pledge and save free TV licences is so cruel. My co-signatories on this motion show the degree of cross-party consensus on this matter. We are calling on the Government to rethink and change course urgently. The threat to TV licences is part and parcel of the Conservative austerity agenda, which has weakened our social fabric and impacted the most vulnerable in our communities. Our social contract, whereby people who work hard all their lives are afforded comfort in old age, is being slowly but certainly unpicked. Free TV licences are a small but important part of that social contract. Taking them away will force older people into poverty and leave many more feeling isolated and alone. Rather than standing by their manifesto promise and standing up for dignity and comfort in old age, the Government are taking it away.

Now a little history. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) said, the TV licence concession for over-75s was introduced just over 20 years ago by the Labour Government as part of a robust package of reforms to support our pensioners and boost their quality of life. The universal benefit was a result of a long campaign to show our oldest pensioners society’s appreciation. Some 4.5 million people over the age of 75 continue to benefit from free TV licences today. Although Labour did not commit explicitly in our last manifesto to continue that policy, our commitment was of course implicit. In case there is any misunderstanding among Ministers, let me be clear. If the Government fall before the natural end of the Parliament in 2022, Labour will honour the Conservative party manifesto pledge to protect TV licences until then.

Despite their manifesto promise of 2017, the Government had already set the stage for the concession to be cut, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) said. In 2015, they outsourced the responsibility for the TV licence concession on to the BBC as part of the charter renewal process.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I am interested that the hon. Gentleman is saying that a Labour Government coming to power before 2020 would restore the TV licence. Is he saying that a future Labour Government after 2020 will maintain the free TV licence for over-75s at a cost that, next year, will already have reached £745 million?

Tom Watson: My answer to the right hon. Gentleman is a complicated one. We are committed to 2022. I do not write or decide our manifesto. He knows I cannot do that. Our commitment to pensioners and protecting their benefits will be very clear. It is highly likely that we will be supporting pensioners after 2022, but I cannot give that commitment today. I will certainly make sure we do not outsource welfare policy to a public broadcaster.

The Government’s outsourcing means that, as of 2020, the BBC will be fully responsible for deciding who gets a free TV licence, and for funding that concession. It is manifestly unfair. Labour opposed that at the time, and our position has not changed—first, because passing responsibility for free TV licences to the BBC is outsourcing an important social policy. The BBC makes some of the best TV content in the world, but it is not a political body—it is not an arm of the Department for Work and Pensions—and nor should it be. It is not elected, and nor should it be.

Secondly, we opposed the move because the Government deliberately saddled our national broadcaster with a cost that could lead to many skilled job losses.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Is there not a more important point, which is that the cost that the public sector broadcaster—a major creative industry employer—is being saddled with from having to pay for free TV licence could prevent it from growing employment, particularly for young people? They find it difficult to find work in traditional industries, and the creative industries pick that up.

Tom Watson: Yes, and this is particularly exacerbated as we have massive technological flux in the broadcasting sector that requires the ability to invest in future content and platforms.
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): On giving a welfare policy to the BBC, a lot of footballing metaphors have been used in the past 24 hours, after Liverpool’s glorious result against Barcelona last night, but does my hon. Friend agree that in policy terms this is the equivalent of a hospital pass?

Tom Watson: It certainly is for this Minister, who happens to be answering today. But it is not as if she, or other Front Benchers, did not have notice, because during the passage of the Bill that enabled this my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) made that very point.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): My hon. Friend said earlier that the BBC makes some of the best programming in the world, and we would all want to agree with that, but the difficulty is that if the BBC loses such a large chunk of its budget, it will be more difficult for it to do this in the future. We would lose our status in the world as one of the greatest broadcasting production houses in the world and other people, often American players, would be able to take up the British market. Is this not a gross dereliction of patriotic duty?

Tom Watson: I think it is, and my hon. Friend makes a good point. I would answer more fully, but I am already running over time.

Keeping TV licences free for all over-75s would require unprecedented cuts to the BBC’s spending on broadcasting and content. This is political cowardice: if the Government want to cut free TV licences for over-75s, they should say so—they should include it in the manifesto and let the public decide on the policy. If the Government want to cut the BBC’s budget by a fifth, they should say so—they should put it in the manifesto and let the public have their say at the ballot box.

The BBC has consulted on a range of options, from means testing, which would still see 3 million households lose out, to raising the qualifying age to 80, which would see 1.5 million households lose their free licence. The conclusions of that consultation are still outstanding, but one thing is clear: if these cuts go ahead in any of the suggested forms, the responsibility will lie firmly at the Government’s door. Passing the buck to the BBC was not a decision made in the national interest, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has said, or for the benefit of older people; it was designed to give the Government political cover to cut a popular policy. This is austerity by stealth. The Conservative party made a commitment to the older people of this country, so now the Government should act and take both the policy and the financial responsibility for funding free TV licences for over-75s back in-house—the two should not be separated.

The BBC has been put in an impossible position by this Government, being asked either to make swingeing cuts to the programmes we all know and love or to take free TV away from older people. That is why when the National Pensioners Convention gathered to protest against scrapping the concession earlier this year, they did not convene outside Broadcasting House, but met outside the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Those protestors know the cost of losing free TV licences.

Age UK’s analysis shows that scrapping the concession completely could push more than 50,000 pensioners below the poverty line. For many, losing £154.50 from their pensions is a frightening prospect and it could mean being forced to choose between heating, eating or having a TV at home. This debate over free TV licences is an indicator of the Government’s broader policies for pensioners. For nine years, Tory austerity has saved money on the back of our most vulnerable citizens. By outsourcing responsibility for paying for TV licences, this Government will be cutting £745 million in 2021-22. That is in addition to the £220 million the Government will be saving in the same year through changes to pension credit. That is nearly a billion pounds of cuts the Government are making, coming directly out of the pockets of pensioners.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important point about how this will hit the most vulnerable and needy of our older people. Joanne, a 78-year-old disabled woman from my constituency, wrote to me to say:

“I worked as a teacher for more than 30 years. I have never claimed benefit of any kind until I became disabled... When I was able I went to the theatre, cinema... etc. Now my only source of entertainment is reading... and TV. To take away the free licence I feel, given what we have put into the country... is mean, petty and very unfair.”

Her wellbeing would be affected by not having TV, as would that of thousands of others. It is estimated that almost 6,000 people would be affected in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is outrageous and that we should be working in the opposite direction, in order to help our older people?

Tom Watson: Please tell Joanne that we are on her side and that we will be pressing the Government to honour their promises to her and the hundreds of thousands of other pensioners.

The number of pensioners living in poverty is rising—it is 1.9 million today, but it is forecast to pass 2 million by 2020. That is to this Government’s shame. Their austerity agenda asks us to focus on the numbers, but we must not forget the human reality of what life is like for our oldest citizens. Social isolation is the scourge that is on the rise. New research from Age UK shows that half of the 4.5 million over-75s in the UK do not live with a partner, with two thirds having a long-standing illness that means they find it difficult to get out and about. The most heartbreakingly of these new statistics is the fact that 400,000 people aged over 75 go a week without meeting up with or speaking on the phone to friends or family. Just one in nine over-75s say that they are not lonely.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I am proud to say that we are very supportive of the motion. The hon. Gentleman has outlined the characteristics of many people in the over-75 group. Despite all the things he has mentioned, these are the people who do get out to vote. What I am hearing from the many who have contacted me is that they want this House of Commons to get an opportunity to vote on the removal of this and for it not to be done in the way that is proposed.

Tom Watson: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I am very grateful that she has aligned her party to the sentiments in this motion—it is very important.
For millions of these people, television is a lifeline. Four in 10 older people say that TV is their main source of company, and this Government are about to take that away from them. The experiences of older people speak for themselves. A 94-year-old widower who is living by himself, with diabetes and dementia, told us: “I cannot leave the house and rely on the television for company and entertainment.” Another pensioner told us: “I am on a small pension and if it came to a choice between food and TV, I would lose out and become isolated and alone. TV keeps me company.”

The truth is you cannot means test for social isolation; loneliness can affect anyone, anywhere. Any change to the current free licences will cause harm.

In conclusion, we know that the Minister will now give a speech saying this is all the BBC’s responsibility and it is up to the BBC to decide the fate of the free TV licence. We do not agree. We are not fooled by the Government’s attempts to offload and obfuscate their own responsibility. This is austerity by the back door. The public know that and pensioners know that. At the heart of this debate today is the question of what a manifesto promise means. I have always regarded manifesto commitments as one of the most basic and important of political pledges, not something that can be merely cast aside. Today, I urge the Minister to stand by that promise made by her party two years ago. She knows the parliamentary arithmetic; if she and the Member behind her tell the Government Front-Bench team they want to honour that promise, they would do so. So I urge every Conservative MP not to betray their promise to voters, not to betray the word they gave them at the 2017 general election. I commend this motion to the House.

2.9 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for securing this important debate on the over-75 licence concession.

I wish to take a moment to recognise the hugely important role that the BBC plays in our national debate. As the shadow Secretary of State said so eloquently, as a constant companion for many people—especially older people—throughout the country, the BBC is indeed one of the UK’s most treasured institutions and is a fundamental part of the country’s social and economic fabric. Members will recognise that the BBC is a world-class broadcaster that produces a very high standard of television, radio and online content that is unparalleled in quality.

Several hon. Members rose—

Margot James: I will give way in just a moment.

From its impartial news and current affairs coverage of the day’s events to its wide-ranging radio content, the BBC provides something for everyone, every day of the week, every week of the year.

Several hon. Members rose—

Margot James: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman behind the shadow Secretary of State. [Interruption.] I will just give way to each Member.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, even if I am a bit flummoxed as to quite whether she was giving way to me. I agree with what she has said about the BBC, so does she think it is right that 20% and rising of the BBC’s resource should in effect go towards fulfilling a Government policy on social security? It is just going to impair the BBC’s ability to make classic programmes.

Margot James: It is important to see the decision that was made in the wider context of the licence fee agreement that was settled in 2015. It included several plus-points for the BBC that it had not had before—I shall come to the detail of them shortly—and it raised the BBC’s income and for the first time put that income on a sustainable footing over a five-year period. In that context, the Government at the time took a reasonable position.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The TV licence concession is seen as a social security concession, so why should it be outsourced to the BBC?

Margot James: As I said to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), it is a concession taken off the charge that everybody pays to the BBC, so it was thought fitting for the BBC to take responsibility. At the time, the country was in a severe financial situation—a very difficult fiscal situation, but I will not labour the point about the origins of the problems—which necessitated a number of difficult decisions. All public institutions and the whole public sector had to find efficiencies and reduce costs, and the BBC was no exception.

Several hon. Members rose—

Margot James: I shall make some progress, then give way in a few moments.

As the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport set out a couple of months ago, the BBC is a powerful example of how our public service broadcasters act as a force for good at home, performing in the national interest to deliver valuable news coverage and hugely popular shows.

Mr Jim Cunningham: To come back to the point I made earlier, if you have given the responsibility to the BBC, why did you include it in your election manifesto? That is the nub of the issue. Can you clarify whether you are going to honour the manifesto commitment or leave it to the BBC to make the cut that you are avoiding?

Mr Speaker: That was very naughty of the hon. Gentleman. The word “you” is intruding with increasing frequency. I did not have a manifesto and I did not make a promise on this matter, but I think the hon. Gentleman was referring to the Minister, and I am happy to vest the responsibility where it lies.

Margot James: I acknowledge that the manifesto commitment was made, but draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention to the fact that Parliament had already voted in favour of passing responsibility to the BBC. The BBC had a responsibility to consult should it wish to make any change to the concession, as it was the Government’s expectation that the BBC would continue to honour the concession.
I recognise the vital public service provided to people of all ages, but Opposition Members are quite right that the BBC is of particular value to older people, who value television as a way of staying connected with the world.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister and the Government please honour the pledge on page 66 of their manifesto to stand up for the four in 10 who find this to be a lifeline?

Margot James: I have already answered that question in other ways, but I draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention to the fact that no decision has yet been made. I was saying to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) that there was an obligation on the BBC to consult should it wish to make any change to the concession, with the Government’s expectation being that the BBC would continue to honour the concession.

The BBC has conducted an extensive consultation, the results of which have not even been published yet, so it is premature to sow all this fear in older people’s minds.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I very much support the continuation of the concession, but is it not important to recognise that when the House passed the Digital Economy Act, including the important element that passed responsibility for the concession to the BBC, Opposition Members supported it?

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): No we did not!

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will not get involved—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) that his volume is almost equal to the volume at which he sings with distinction in Cardiff West. If he wishes to make his point, the conventional means by which to do so is via an intervention, rather than by yelling from a sedentary position.

Margot James: The key point is that in November 2016, the House passed the Digital Economy Act, including the important element that passed responsibility for the concession to the BBC.

Chris Bryant: The truth of the matter is that by passing that responsibility on the Government have, if the BBC is to implement the Government’s pledge, taken a vast chunk out of the BBC’s budget. My constituents want to know whether the BBC could do something better with that money—for instance, by making sure that we have a proper digital service across the whole of the valleys of south Wales. Why is it right that after the Government have stopped meddling with it, the national broadcaster ends up with a budget that is a fifth of the size of Sky’s? How is that a national broadcaster?

Margot James: I take issue with the hon. Gentleman’s asking whether the BBC could find something better to do with the money. Opposition Members have been full of reasons why it would be desirable for the BBC to continue to honour—

Kevin Brennan: Will the Minister give way?
Several hon. Members rose—

Margot James: I want to make a bit of progress, because I know that many hon. Members want to speak in the debate.

The BBC’s brilliant public service and the role that it plays for older people would not be possible without the licence fee. Last year, the BBC received more than £3.8 billion in licence fee income, and it is that income that underpins the BBC’s crucial role in making sure that everyone in the UK can access the content that educates, informs and entertains. The Government recognised the importance of the licence fee when we agreed the licence fee funding settlement with the BBC in 2015. We agreed a five-year licence fee funding settlement, which provided for the first time financial certainty and a sustainable income for the BBC and we committed to maintaining the current licence fee funding model for the duration of this charter period until 2027. We unfroze the licence fee for the first time since 2010 by guaranteeing that, each year, it will rise in line with inflation.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Surely the point is this: we cannot provide financial certainty for the BBC at the expense of the over-75s. Whether or not it was right to give power to the BBC in the Digital Economy Act is not the issue. We have to look at this on the basis of the outcomes, not the processes. Will the Minister not accept that, right now, the outcomes for the over-75s look pretty grim?

Margot James: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am sure that the BBC will listen to those comments, with which I have considerable sympathy. This was part of a fair deal for the BBC. I have already quoted the director-general of the BBC, but he did also say at the time that it was a strong deal for the BBC and that it provided financial stability—that is important for all viewers, whatever their age—and Parliament agreed, which we have already discussed.

As the House will recognise, the Government have been clear about their expectations on this matter. The Government guaranteed the over-75 concession at least until 2020. We agreed with the BBC, and it was approved by this House, that the future of the concession was the BBC’s decision, and the BBC is rightly operationally independent of the Government. Therefore, this matter is for the BBC. Given the importance of the issue, we have made our expectations clear. Let me just point out that the BBC has undergone a significant and extensive testing. I want to reassure any older people watching the fantastic archived content for a lot longer than the very short period that exists at the moment—there was a constraint on the development of iPlayer for far too long.

Several hon. Members rose—

Margot James: I will just make a bit of progress and then I will give way again.

The BBC consultation set out a number of options for the future of the concession and it set out that the BBC may choose to keep the concession as it stands—a free TV licence for those aged 75 and above. It also looked carefully at the case for removing the concession entirely. As many Members will be aware, it also had a number of other options in between those two points. They include a change to the eligible age for the concession, a discounted concession, a move from a free licence to that discounted one, and the introduction of means testing. I want to reassure any older people watching that the decision has not yet been made. The BBC has listened carefully to the concerns expressed throughout the consultation. I am thankful that the BBC has consulted so widely on the issue to seek the views of licence fee payers across the country.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Is not one of the cruelest things about this that it is younger people, by and large, who have a far greater choice when it comes to TV viewing, because many of them are now using subscription services, which actually do not require a BBC licence at all and, in many cases, those services are also cheaper? Older people do not have that choice, is it not very cruel that those are the people we are trying to restrict in their TV watching, which, as others have said, might lead to more social loneliness?
Margot James: I do not necessarily agree that older people do not have that choice. I agree that many older people rely on the BBC more than any other channel—that is probably true—but older people have access to other channels in the same way as people of other age groups.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Many of my Moray constituents have contacted me, urging me to support this concession for the over-75s remaining in place. The Minister went over a number of options that the BBC is looking at. Does she understand that many people really do not agree that we should be talking about taking this TV licence concession away from the over-75s when there are so many celebrities and pundits on very high salaries?

Margot James: My hon. Friend makes exactly the same point that was made emphatically to me by a very good friend and constituent of mine. The BBC operates in a tough commercial environment. To our minds, such salaries might seem extraordinary—at times, ridiculous—but these are the salaries for very well-established celebrities, sportsmen and women, and a number of others. The BBC has to compete, but I take my hon. Friend’s point; it is one that has been made well by other people who have written to me.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): One of my Colne Valley constituents said to me, “The TV is the companion in the corner of the room for me, and I would be so lonely without it.” Is the Minister happy to take that companion away from 6,750 over-75s in Colne Valley? [Interruption.]

Margot James: My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon has just reminded me that it is a decision for the BBC to make. I am sure that the BBC has listened to the hon. Lady and others across the House. I have also received such letters, and I do understand. I draw her attention to the fact that there is a range of options. I would gently say that not every older person over the age of 75 would be unable to afford to contribute to the future of our great broadcaster. It is important that we remember that, sadly, there have had to be efficiencies and reductions across the public sector, and the BBC has been no exception. The future of the concession is down to the BBC; it is no longer the Government’s decision. I look forward to the BBC’s final decision on the future of the concession, which I anticipate it will announce next month.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, let me say that colleagues will be aware that this is a very well-subscribed debate, so I expect Back-Bench speeches to be five minutes in length. That will mean that we can get everybody in.

2.32 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate but it feels as though, when I get on my feet in this place, it is increasingly because the Government appear to be completely abrogating their responsibilities towards our older people. Whether they are removing pension credits from mixed-age couples, or failing to keep their side of the bargain and pay the pensions due to women born in the 1950s who received little or no notice of the rise in the state pension age, it seems that this is happening more and more. I wonder whether the Minister is comfortable with the undeniable narrative that is emerging.

Today we are talking about the UK Government’s decision—and it is their decision—to have a go at the over-75s. I have already raised this matter several times in the Chamber and I have written to the Secretary of State, as have others; but I have never had a proper or meaningful response. Today I had been hoping for that response, but sadly we have just heard a wee bit more of the same. It is important to be clear that the Government have maintained—we heard this again today—that they are not scrapping TV licences for the over-75s, and that they are simply delegating responsibility for those licences to the BBC. This is a game of semantics that tells us that the Government want to scrap the free TV licences but do not want to take responsibility for doing so. It simply will not wash.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): At the hustings during the 2017 general election campaign, a member of the audience said to me that he felt that the Government were often punishing him for growing old, partly through the measures that the hon. Lady just mentioned. Does she agree that this was an opportunity for the Government to do something to prove that they do take into account the difficulties faced by pensioners and people aged over 75—the loneliness that not having television could provoke—rather than reinforcing the feeling of being punished?

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree. The Government have picked a fight with over-75s for no particular reason, and for no particular benefit that I can see. But not taking responsibility for this matter simply will not wash.

I ask the Minister, since when has the BBC become an offshoot of the Department for Work and Pensions? The BBC is a broadcaster. It should not, and must not, be charged with deciding how much support our pensioners should receive from wider society. The UK Government have undoubtedly abrogated their responsibility for TV licences, and have left the BBC to decide whether it will impose this charge on the over-75s. The BBC will have £745 million less to spend annually on programmes—the combined budget of BBC 2, BBC 4 and BBC Radio 3—if it continues with the free TV licences. Options being considered range across the BBC taking on the funding, seeking partial payment or removing the concession entirely, putting it in an impossible position.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): The hon. Lady is making a very good speech. The fact is that this benefit given to elderly pensioners is a benefit—I speak as someone with an interest, because I think I am the only person here who is over 75 and actually receives the free television licence—but a benefit should be paid for out of progressive taxation, whereby the rich pay most and the poor pay least. As everyone under 75 pays for our licences, some of those people are very poor indeed, effectively having to pay some contribution towards broadcasting, which should be paid for by the state.

Patricia Gibson: I agree. When we move away from progressive taxation we move into a system that is extremely unfair, and not the kind of society that most of us want to live in.
Former BBC director-general Greg Dyke suggested that leaving the BBC to pick up the tab would impact on programme quality. He said:

"Let’s not kid ourselves this won’t have an impact on what the BBC will supply. It will."

As well as the impossible choice that has been foisted on the BBC as the UK Government seek cover, this policy means that the Tories are rolling back on their manifesto pledge to maintain pensioner benefits, including free TV licences. How can older people—indeed, anyone—trust what they say in any future manifesto pledge?

Let us remember that the reason that all households with someone aged over 75 have been entitled to receive free TV licences, funded by the UK Government, is to help tackle pensioner poverty and isolation. The Tories have decided to cease funding completely from next year. If the free TV licences are scrapped, the consequences for my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran, of whom more than 9,000 will be affected, will be far-reaching. Combatting loneliness is very important when it comes to health outcomes for older people. To try to contract out that responsibility to the BBC is cowardly, fools no one and sets a dangerous precedent.

According to the BBC’s own figures, scrapping the over-75s concessionary licence will take an average of more than £22,000 a week out of the pockets of over-75s in every single constituency, and we know that many thousands of pensioners already struggle to make ends meet. Age Scotland’s “money matters” project found that four in 10 people over the age of 50 report feeling financially squeezed, and its survey on the housing needs of older people found that six in 10 pensioners who live alone report difficulties paying their fuel bills. We know that 70% of over-75s have a long-standing illness and 29% live below or just above the poverty line. Make no mistake: this Government are effectively asking our older people to choose between switching on the heating or turning on the TV. Having another bill to pay will push many more below the poverty line, or deeper into poverty. As of 1 April, the cost of the colour TV licence increased to £154.50. Age UK has warned that scrapping the concession would push 50,000 over-75s into poverty. That should cause the Government to hang their head in shame.

The financial strain can be further exacerbated by any disability or long-term health conditions that an older person may be living with. The proportion of adults with a long-term, limiting health condition is increasing as the population ages. More than four-fifths of people aged 85 or over have reported that their daily lives are limited by a long-term health problem or disability. That is important, as there are numerous extra costs associated with having a disability or long-term health condition, such as having to get taxis more often to get out and about, and extra heating costs. Many rely on their television for companionship and entertainment. For the considerable number who do not have the internet, TV helps them to stay up to date with what is happening in the world.

The Government have told this House repeatedly that they cannot pay women born in the 1950s their pensions because we are all living longer. Well, given that the Government recognise that we are all living longer, they cannot shirk their responsibilities and abandon those who are living longest. The Government cannot have this both ways. The goalposts cannot be shifted depending on which particular group of society they wish to shaft at any particular time; it is simply not good enough.

For many older people, their television is not just a box in the corner—it is company. Television is a lifeline, particularly for those who are most vulnerable and older. If mobility issues mean that someone struggles to get out and about, the TV helps them to stay connected. When money is a constant worry and that is stressful, it is an escape. When people spend their days alone, it gives them something to look forward to, and they often identify closely with TV characters and personalities.

Figures show that over-75s watch an average of 33 hours of television each week, compared with eight hours a week for those in their 20s. Imagine the loss of that line for so many of our poorer pensioners, who simply will not be able to afford the cost of a TV licence.

Let us not forget—this has not been mentioned yet—that every year people are fined for non-payment of their TV licence. To potentially prosecute people in their 80s and 90s is completely unacceptable, and it could well happen if these free television licences are abolished. I ask the Minister: is this an example of addressing the “burning injustices” that the Prime Minister once spoke about? I believe it is vital to support our pensioners. Not only is the UK state pension the lowest in the developed world relative to wages; it has been further damaged by the Tory Government’s plans to reduce eligibility for pension credit, leaving some couples out of pocket by £7,320 every year. If we throw in their contempt for women born in the 1950s regarding increases in the pension age, it is clear that the Government have no intention of honouring the contribution that our elderly population have made over the years.

The BBC is a broadcaster. Public welfare is not its remit, and it should not be expected to decide whether older people have free TV licences or not.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank the hon. Lady for the very strong speech that she is making. As I said earlier, a lot of older people who have contacted me are deeply frustrated because they see this decision as having no democratic accountability. They want Members in this House to make a decision and then implement it. Because of the agreement made with the BBC some years ago, this decision has been delegated—put out of this place—and that is deeply frustrating. Does she agree that this must change, and that this House must take action on it?

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree. We have a worrying trend of Parliament being bypassed. I know that minority government is not a comfortable place to be, but if a party of government cannot come to the Chamber and sell its policies, maybe the policies are the problem, not Parliament itself.

The BBC should not be making this decision. It should not and must not become the responsibility of a broadcaster. Lord Bragg has said:

“The BBC is not an organisation that should collect taxes, of which the licence fee is one, for social purposes. Its money should be used for making programmes.”

Clearly, the UK Government disagree. I urge the Tories—I urge this Government—to honour this extremely important manifesto commitment, to do the right thing and to maintain pensioner benefits, including the TV licence,
so that elderly people can continue to watch television for free instead of having to choose between watching television and switching on their heating and/or potentially being criminalised in their twilight years for watching “Coronation Street”.

Some say—I have heard them say it today—that many pensioners could pay for their own TV licence. That is not an argument to impose a charge for free TV licences; it is an argument against universalism that takes us down an extremely dangerous road. It is a distracting diversion that is being used as a tactic to remove essential support. In any case, it does not matter whether one thinks that universalism as a principle is wrong—the fact is that this was in the Tory manifesto, and the back-pedalling is fooling no one.

This policy is perhaps the most mean-spirited policy of this Government so far—and that is saying something. The Government need to get a grip, stop attacking our older people, accord them the care and respect they are due, and stop making life more difficult for them. As we have heard, it is extremely important that this House is not an argument to impose a charge for free TV licences; that is that this was in the Tory manifesto, and the back-pedalling is fooling no one.

2.46 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. As the Minister pointed out, I was the Secretary of State at the time when the licence fee settlement was agreed with the BBC, so I would like to set out some of the reasons why those decisions were reached.

As the Opposition spokesman said, the concessionary TV licence for over-75s is not a fundamental pillar of the welfare state—it was actually introduced by the previous Labour Government. It was introduced to address an anomaly that elderly people living in sheltered housing did not have to pay the full licence fee whereas others did. However, the Labour Government did not introduce free TV licences for all pensioners, on the basis that it was far too expensive to do so—they restricted it to those aged over 75 at a cost, at that time, of £365 million. It is important to realise that that money was not removed from the BBC—it was given to the BBC by the Department for Work and Pensions. It has always been the case, since then, that the cost of exemption from the TV licence is met out of the Government’s budget. The cost to the Government of doing so has risen steadily, so that by last year it had already reached £660 million.

I had the task of negotiating both the new BBC charter and the licence fee settlement. Personally, I would have much preferred that the licence fee had been included within the charter negotiations, since the licence fee settlement, to some extent, pre-empted decisions that we took as a result of the charter review process. However, as the Minister rightly pointed out, we were in very difficult financial circumstances thanks to the profligacy of the previous Labour Government, and we had to take a lot of very difficult decisions. The then Chancellor was clear that we should seek to achieve savings from the BBC, as a publicly owned institution funded by the Government, in the same way that all other public institutions were being asked to find savings. So we agreed with the BBC that it would take over the cost of funding the licence fee concession. However, we were also clear that we had given a pledge that it would be maintained until 2020, and therefore the agreement with the BBC was that it would take it over in 2020.

I have to say to the House that the negotiations with the BBC over that were indeed robust. I remember sitting down with the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, with George Osborne and with Lord Hall, the director-general of the BBC, and we had some good discussions in which Lord Hall argued forcibly that this would have a detrimental impact on the BBC. Therefore, in recognition of that, we also included, as part of the licence fee settlement, agreement to address some of the things the BBC raised as its principal concerns. One was the freeze in the licence fee. The licence fee had not gone up at all for a number of years, and therefore the BBC was looking at a real-terms reduction every year. We agreed that the licence fee should be unfrozen. Secondly, a growing number of people were avoiding paying the licence fee by watching the BBC on catch-up, through the iPlayer. Under the law as it then stood, if someone watched the BBC a minute after the live transmission, they did not have to pay the licence fee. The licence fee was therefore extended to close what was called the iPlayer loophole.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the director-general of the BBC, Lord Hall, that the funding arrangements put in place with the BBC by my right hon. Friend and the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, represented a fair deal?

Mr Whittingdale: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, because he allows me to quote the director-general. As I say, our negotiations were robust, but we emerged from them with the director-general issuing a public statement saying that it was “the right deal... in difficult economic circumstances”.

He went on to say:

“Far from being a cut, the way this financial settlement is shaped gives us, effectively, flat licence fee income across the first five years of the next charter.”

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I do not know whether my right hon. Friend will mention this part of the licence fee deal, but it is worth making the point that the last Labour Government imposed on the licence fee a levy to fund broadband roll-out, and because of the success of the broadband roll-out under our Government, we removed that levy from the BBC. While there was a stick with free TV licences, there were carrots with the removal of some of the subsidies the last Government had asked the BBC to provide.

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who was also a key player at that time as a Minister in the Department. He is absolutely right. I mentioned two of the BBC’s requests at the time—the unfreezing of the licence fee and the closure of the loophole—but he is correct to point out that the BBC had always been unhappy about the top-slicing of the licence fee to fund broadband, which I now agree was a mistake. That was another agreement we reached with the BBC, which I think was why the BBC felt that it was a fair and proper settlement.
Mr McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman is implying that the BBC was happy with all this at the time, but in the press statement announcing the consultation, the BBC said:

“The BBC could copy the scheme... but we think it would fundamentally change the BBC because of the scale of service cuts we would need to make.”

That is not the statement of an organisation that thinks it can easily absorb this.

Mr Whittingdale: The agreement with the BBC was that it would have responsibility for maintaining or amending the licence fee concession. The right hon. Gentleman quoted the BBC’s view about the cost of maintaining the concession as it stands, and that view is understandable, since the cost next year will be £745 million, rising to £1.06 billion by 2029-30. I am not at all surprised that the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr McFadden) said that the future Labour Government would maintain the concession at the cost of the taxpayer, since that would be a £1 billion public expenditure pledge.

In recognition of that, the BBC has put forward three different options. It has talked about continuation, which, as the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said, it feels is not realistic, as that would amount to the current cost of BBC 2, BBC 3, BBC 4, the news channel, CBBC and CBeebies all put together. It has also suggested some amendment to the concession, or discontinuing it altogether. Each of the three possible amendments to the licence fee concession that the BBC has suggested has some attraction. It has talked about raising the age limit to 77 or 80, which to some extent would reflect the ageing population and maintain roughly the same proportion. A second possibility is to introduce a discounted fee, so that people over 75 would not have to pay the full cost.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My right hon. Friend, who is an excellent neighbour, is making an excellent speech. Many of my constituents who are over 75 have emailed me to say that they want to continue to watch the TV with a free licence, but they are not necessarily also watching the BBC on multiple other devices, as many younger people are. Can my right hon. Friend see a case for older members of the public still being able to watch the BBC via a single device, while younger people watch on multiple devices? Would that sort of system work?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I reiterate that there is pressure on time, and interventions need to be short.

Mr Whittingdale: I will of course take account of your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, but my hon. Friend raises an interesting point, which I want to touch on as I conclude my remarks.

The third possible amendment would be to limit the concession to those in receipt of pension credit. That would address many of the concerns expressed by Opposition Members about those on very low incomes finding it hard to afford and would introduce an element of targeting, to ensure that those who will struggle to afford the television licence do not have to do so.

There is another change that I ask the BBC to consider, which is not included in its options. At the moment, households are entitled to a free television licence if a member of the household is over 75. It is ridiculous that a household might have four adults of working age who are all bringing in an income, but because they happen to have their grandmother living with them, they do not have to pay for a television licence. I ask the BBC to consider a simple change, to restrict the concession to households that only consist of people aged over 75.

I want to end by saying that this raises fundamental questions about the future of the licence fee. Viewing habits are changing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) indicated. Evasion of the TV licence is rising. It has gone up from 5.2% in 2010 to an estimated 7% now, with the advent of new services such as Netflix and Amazon, and soon possibly Apple and Disney. The old argument that every household needs to pay the licence fee because everybody watches the BBC, is, I am afraid, beginning to break down, and we are reaching a position where many households watch the huge range of programmes available and never turn to the BBC.

That is why I have always believed that, in the long term, the licence fee is not sustainable. We addressed that at the beginning of the charter review. It is recognised by the director-general, who has said that the BBC needs to look at alternative models and has mentioned the possibility of introducing subscription services on iPlayer. At the moment, there is no alternative to the licence fee because we do not have a system where people who choose not to pay it can be cut off; that was why we reached the conclusion that the licence fee had to be maintained. But in the longer term, that will not be true.

There will come a time when the licence fee cannot be sustained, and that will be the task of the future Secretary of State who has the job of undertaking the next charter review.

2.58 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Free TV licences for over-75s were introduced in 2000 by a Labour Government—one of the many policies introduced by Labour to deliver a better quality of life for the people of this nation. Many of the people who voted Conservative in the 2017 general election likely did so expecting the Tory Government to continue to provide free TV licences for people over 75, as it was in the party’s manifesto, alongside promises to keep free bus passes, eye tests and prescriptions for the duration of this Parliament. If the Government were one who kept their manifesto promises, I could happily end my speech now. Sadly, as with many of the promises made by this Government, that manifesto pledge has been broken, and it once again falls on Labour and other Opposition Members to explain to the Government why the policy of scrapping free TV licences for over-75s will cause great harm to some of the most vulnerable in our society.

As I expected, the Minister made out that it is not the Government’s decision to scrap free TV licences for over-75s but the BBC’s, and the BBC is now the one in charge of licensing. While that is technically correct, the reality is that this Conservative Government have unloaded their pledge to the elderly of this nation on to the BBC—outsourcing without the funding. Essentially, they are saying to the BBC, “You fund the free licences and decide whether they should continue”. The Tory Government know full well that the BBC will not have
the financial capabilities to maintain this programme and eventually will need to cancel the free TV licences. This is not the fault of the BBC. The expected cost of the free licences will be £745 million by 2021-22, but I would add that under this Government, due to austerity, life expectancy is predicted to decline.

To put the outsourcing by this Government into context, it is a fifth of the BBC’s budget and the equivalent of what is spent today on BBC 2, BBC 3, BBC 4, the BBC News channel, CBBC and CBeebies. That would be the cost in funding and programming. A broadcaster should not be expected to take on the role that is clearly within the realm of a Government Department. This is a Tory Government using smoke and mirrors.

If free TV licences were to be scrapped, 2.4 million older people living entirely on their own would lose their TV licence, and a means-tested system would lead to 1.6 million losing their licence. In my constituency alone, 7,100 people could lose their licence, and £1 million would be robbed out of the pockets of those vulnerable people. Age UK estimates that over 2 million over-75s would need to go without a TV licence or be forced to give up essentials such as heating or even food.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Rimmer: No. I am sorry, but I will not give way. This callous act has the potential to drive 50,000 pensioners below the poverty line. Age UK has found that 29% of over-75s live in poverty or just above the poverty line. Does my hon. Friend want to come in now?

Nick Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—eventually. Four in 10 older people say that their TV is their main source of company, and Age UK says that cutting their access to it would be an “unthinkably cruel blow”. Does she agree with me that the Government need to stop passing the buck, and need to honour their manifesto pledge and their promise to protect free TV licences for the over-75s?

Ms Rimmer: I absolutely do. I have mentioned what Age UK has found about 29% of over-75s, and £154.50 out of a fixed income will push those just above the line into poverty.

Television is a bridge to the outside world for the 2 million people over 75, of whom almost half are disabled and many others have serious health conditions. When mobility is difficult and people struggle even to get to the end of their street, the TV will often be the only companionship, entertainment and stimulation available. The United Kingdom is facing a loneliness epidemic among our elderly, and it is not good enough that one in four see a television as their only source of companionship. In fact, the only human voices they hear are from the television, and it is important for our sanity that we hear human voices. It is fundamentally wrong for this Government, through this policy, to take away the little bit that people do have. Many of our elderly in this nation are not online, and those who are may struggle with technology, as I do.

This policy, which will do so much harm, is clear evidence that the Government have not brought austerity to an end, but are driving forward their heartless and unnecessary austerity agenda. The UK is spending less on public expenditure as a percentage of GDP: it has now dropped to just over 40%—40.8%—from 48%. This is one of the lowest in the developed world when compared with similar nations such as Germany and Finland, which spend 4% and 12% more of their GDP than we do. How can this Tory Government justify not continuing to fund the financing required to maintain free TV licences for over-75s?

Labour has a clear alternative, which is not to force the BBC into an impossible position where it has no choice but to scrap or severely cut free TV licences for the over-75s. A Labour Government would commit to delivering free TV licences to the over-75s, providing support and company for some of the most vulnerable of our people.

I call on the Government to step in and to deliver their manifesto pledge and their promise to protect free TV licences for the over-75s to ensure that those people are not forced to make an unacceptable choice between what little companionship they have and living in the cold and having less food on their plates.

3.4 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), but I have to say that it is a shame this debate has descended into party politics. Actually, it should be about the future of the BBC—how the BBC’s funding can properly abide by the strictures by which it has to abide and how it is to deliver its services in the future—but we seem to be having a debate other than the one that is sensible.

I love the BBC. I worked for the BBC on and off for 20 years, and it is the best broadcaster in the world. I would never support any sort of arrangement for the future funding of the BBC that I thought would do it damage or that I thought would lead to under-serving the people who deserve to be served by the BBC as the best public broadcaster in the world. The BBC produces some of the stand-out TV in what is now a global TV industry—with “Line of Duty”, which had nearly 10 million viewers on Sunday, as well as “Strictly Come Dancing”, “Bodyguard”, “Blue Peter” and “Match of the Day”—and it has its unrivalled news coverage, its radio, its online services, its children’s programmes and all the research and development it does. I am a passionate supporter of the BBC, but we should be debating how we ensure the future security of funding for the BBC and the future security of provision of service for all the people who enjoy the BBC.

Let us be clear: as has been mentioned in the past, the funding deal the BBC accepted in June 2015 gave it financial stability for five years. It was a deal that saw a guaranteed, copper-bottomed, real-terms increase in funding for the BBC. That is the sort of arrangement private commercial organisations can only dream of. They would think it was all their Christmases come at once to have that sort of guaranteed income for five years. In addition, as was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), as part of the deal the contribution that the BBC previously made to the roll-out of superfast broadband—it used to contribute £150 million a year—was cut to zero by 2020, and the iPlayer loophole was quite rightly closed, bringing in an extra £41 million a year.
[Peter Heaton-Jones]

The BBC was very happy with that deal. It welcomed the deal, and it accepted the deal. I have two quotes for the House, although I will not go over ground that has already been covered. Lord Hall, as I suppose we should properly call him, the BBC’s director-general, said that “the BBC used this pre-budget window of opportunity to reach a fair deal”.

Furthermore, speaking on the Radio 4 “Today” programme, one of the fantastic institutions that the public quite rightly pay the BBC to produce, he said:

“The government’s decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us”—in other words, the BBC—“has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC. My bottom line was, if I can use this as an opportunity to get back for the BBC things I think are really important—an inflation-set licence fee and an end to top-slicing—then I think that is really important. And that is exactly what we have done.”

The BBC accepted this deal. It accepted this guaranteed, copper-bottomed funding increase and welcomed it, and it now needs to live within its means. I have to say, having worked on and off for the BBC for 20 years, that there are many ways, it is sad to say, in which the BBC does not do so. We have recently seen figures showing that there are now nearly 100 members of BBC staff who earn more than £150,000 a year, and some of them earn a lot more than that. We have recently seen that the BBC’s programme for developing a new “EastEnders” set has gone £30 million over budget and will be delivered three and a half years late—it is almost as though they are building a railway line—and an entire technology project aimed at digitising all its programmes has had to be cut, after spending nearly £60 million. The BBC must look more carefully at how it spends its money and at the salaries it pays its staff. It must ensure that it can continue to deliver the concession that we are discussing, which it accepted in a staff. It must ensure that it can continue to deliver the line—and an entire technology project aimed at digitising.
3.15 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby). I stood in Lewisham, Deptford in 2005 when my now neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromwich East (Tom Watson), to ask him a question that is fundamental to this debate. I asked him whether, in principle, a multimillionaire should receive a free TV licence, and he said, in effect, “Of course they should.” I happen to disagree fundamentally with that proposition.

**Kevin Brennan:** In principle, should a multimillionaire receive free treatment on the NHS?

**James Cartlidge:** That is a completely different point, and let me explain why. | Calm down; give me a moment. | The original response—the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) made this point, very fairly—was that it is about universality. The justification for providing free TV licences regardless of wealth is that they are a universal benefit.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) pointed out, however, eligibility for a free TV licence over the age of 75 was introduced only in 2000. There is no way that anyone could say it was a fundamental tenet of the welfare state contract—something that someone would expect to receive in exchange for their contributions—unlike treatment on the national health service, which has been there since just after the war and is very clearly based on the principle of paying into the system, sharing risk and receiving. I think most people accept that point.

**Julie Cooper** (Burnley) (Lab): Did the hon. Gentleman stand on the Conservative manifesto that promised to retain free TV licences for over-75s?

**James Cartlidge:** I did, but this is a debating Chamber. | Calm down; give me a moment. | The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) does not agree. I hope that she makes some original points when she comes to speak. I simply say that there will probably be a general election at some point in the next few years, and possibly before 2022. In this Chamber, we should debate policy; that is what we are put here to do.

I happen to think that one of the biggest questions we face concerns the fact that people who are going into work today will not receive an occupational pension, because such pensions have disappeared. Many retired people—good luck to them; my parents are in this category—receive good occupational pensions. Some of those people, although not most, would be regarded by many as relatively wealthy. In my view, therefore, we must look at the principle of taxing benefits that are paid out as so-called freebies—of course, the money has to come from somewhere—according to the recipients’ means.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I want to expand on the point about the difference between the welfare state as originally devised by the 1945 Government, and what we have now. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it is a moveable feast? Things have been added and taken away over the years. For example, dentistry was included at first, and it is not now. We added the free TV licences in 2000, and David Cameron added universal infant free school meals—heaven forbid that anyone would try to take them away now. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the welfare state has changed and evolved over the years, and that is a good thing?

**James Cartlidge:** The hon. Lady makes a perfectly fair point. The welfare state has always evolved. At heart, however, it is about the contributory system. I think most people would expect that when they pay into the system, they will get what they were told they would receive. Obviously, anyone who was over 75 in 2000 and went on to receive a free TV licence cannot conceivably have been told, when they began paying contributions at the start of their working life, that that was one of the benefits that they would receive.

Of course, the obvious point to be made is this: does that mean that I think we should not have free TV licences for the over-75s? The short answer is that I do not think there should be a TV licence. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon that it is not remotely sustainable as a solution. In my office in Parliament, I have three young members of staff. We worked out that we have three subscriptions to Netflix, two to Amazon Prime and one to Now TV. The whole world of TV viewing in this country is changing very rapidly and the licence fee is deeply anachronistic. It is levied on people without any reference to their ability to pay and without reference to whether they even watch the BBC. It does not seem to fit the era in which we live or the direction in which communications is heading.

How should we pay for it? I do not imagine that I am the world’s foremost expert on this point, but I think that—taking the principle of public service broadcasting, which I do believe in—everyone should contribute to some degree, based on their ability to pay. We should look at a core service for the BBC funded by, for example, a supplement on subscriptions to Netflix, to ensure that everyone who benefits from having a public broadcaster contributes to some degree.

In this Chamber, we could all stand up at any time and say the easiest thing. The easiest thing here is to say how wrong it is to take away this responsibility from the Government and put it on the BBC. The easy point to make would be to suggest that we as Conservatives are somehow taking benefits away from people or doing something harsh. The reality is that the welfare contract I have referred to throughout my speech is changing fundamentally.

**Emma Little Pengelly:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**James Cartlidge:** I will give way to the hon. Lady in a moment. It will be my last intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We cannot ignore the fact that we have an intergenerational issue. That is no one’s fault, by the way—no one intended it to be like that—but those entering work now will not receive occupational pensions or many of the benefits that those who have retired have done. The implications of that need to be debated at some point.
Emma Little Pengelly: When we look back over the comments from the BBC at that time, it is clear—many people have referenced this—that many people welcomed it because it was getting concessions elsewhere that they believed would offset that. The issue facing us here today is that they got those concessions and banked them. They have now changed their mind and it is older people who are going to suffer. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the ball was dropped and that a guarantee should have been put into the agreement that if concessions were going to be handed over there should at least have been a guaranteed period to protect free licences for older people or for the issue to have come back to this place?

James Cartlidge: I have always admired the hon. Lady and in particular her party when it comes to negotiations. They do tend to take a robust stance. I understand the negotiations with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon were particularly robust, but she makes a very fair point.

I will conclude by saying that all universal benefits—the winter fuel allowance, the free bus pass and the TV licence—are coming under scrutiny because we are having to look at where we get the money to pay for social care and so on. We cannot spend the money twice. The money we give to someone who owns a vast estate and receives a free TV licence is money we could have spent on the social care of those with dementia and so on. We should not pretend. Public money is not infinite and we should debate the fairest way to allocate it. If we look at the sustainability of the TV licence—give pensioners dignity. They are a reward for the rest of the population. However, pensioners are more likely to be lonely, to be ill and to feel the cold at night. The great measures that Gordon Brown brought about the whole of BBC sport. Some 3% of total sports viewing is now produced by the BBC, but that includes the women’s World cup and women’s netball. All of that will go. It is not small beer.

Some might say that times have changed since 2000, and that pensioners are no more likely to be poor than the rest of the population. However, pensioners are more likely to be lonely, to be ill and to feel the cold at night. The great measures that Gordon Brown brought in—the winter fuel payments, the free bus pass and the TV licence—give pensioners dignity. They are a reward for their contribution to society over many years. Means-testing would completely change the nature of those benefits.

I will conclude with a plea to hon. Members on the Tory Benches, because I do not think this is over yet. A very important commitment was given today by the deputy leader of the Labour party: if there is a general election—as an MP with a majority of 249, I view the idea with mixed feelings, but every day is a bonus—we will go into it with a pledge to fund free TV licences for the over-75s. I will be proud to go into the election with
that platform, which I think will definitely be a winner. There will also be a Tory leadership contest, and I think TV licences for the over-75s will be an issue in the shires and among the candidates. Let us break free from the shackles of George Osborne and unite across the House to fully fund the licence fee concession for the over-75s.

3.29 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): In 2000, the Labour Government took the very positive step of exempting the over-75s from television licence charges. Millions of people have benefited; 5,220 pensioner households currently benefit in my constituency. In 2017, the Conservative manifesto promised those people and their families, in Burnley and Padiham and throughout the country, that that benefit would continue. That promise has been broken, those people have been betrayed, and I have heard nothing from Conservative Members to mitigate that.

The decision to outsource the commitment to the BBC is a betrayal. Shockingly, the decision was made in a closed room with no public consultation and no consideration of impact. More than £150 a year may not seem like an awful lot to Conservative Members, but for pensioners on a fixed income it is a substantial amount. Age UK estimates that more than 2 million pensioner households will cut back on food and heating to pay the licence fee, while others will give up their TV altogether.

Does the Minister understand that for many people over 75, particularly those who live alone, the TV is literally a lifeline? Loneliness and social isolation are reaching epidemic proportions, and older people are far more likely to be affected. Many rely on their TV for companionship: the Campaign to End Loneliness has found that 40% of old people cite TV as their only source of companionship. For those who are housebound, the TV may be the only voice that they hear; without it, the long, lonely evenings will be even lonelier. But it is more than that: for so many people, switching on the television set represents their only connection with the outside world. Less than 50% of people in the over-75 age group have access to the internet, and the majority are unaware of social media and the vast array of online services. To all intents and purposes they are digitally excluded, so their access to TV is even more important.

The Government have outsourced the delivery of their manifesto commitment and are now sneakily trying to outsource responsibility. There is a pattern here: the Government have a habit of outsourcing services but with no funding to go with them. We need look no further than the shifting of public health responsibility to local government—another short-sighted Tory shambles, which is destined to lead to more problems and an increased financial burden on the NHS.

The BBC has been placed in an impossible position. The cost of providing free TV licences for the over-75s currently amounts to £745 million a year, which equates to 18% of the BBC's service budget. A budget reduction of such magnitude, at a time when operational costs are rising and competition from Sky and Netflix is increasing, is unsustainable and can be managed only by reducing the channels and services offered to customers. The BBC is at the forefront of the UK creative industries, with an enviable reputation right across the world. Forcing it to take this financial hit is a blow to the entire industry sector, which contributes more than £100 billion a year to the UK economy.

I am also mindful that withdrawing this benefit will be yet another blow to the economy in my constituency. Withdrawal of free licences for all over-75s will take £785,610 out of Burnley. If the benefit were means-tested instead, and only those pensioners who claim pensioner credit were allowed to keep their free licences, the cut to Burnley would still amount to more than £500,000. It really is a scandal. The Government must think again.

The central point is that it is not the BBC's responsibility to fund this benefit. Free television licences for the over-75s are a social benefit, which should be funded by the Government. The Government are trying to shirk their responsibilities. This is yet another broken election promise that makes an absolute mockery of their claim that austerity is over. If austerity is over, they should do the decent thing, keep their promises, fund this universal service and give our senior citizens the support that they deserve.

3.33 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is great to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), who made an excellent case.

By failing to protect the free TV licence for over-75s, the Government are shamefully breaking their own 2017 manifesto pledge. According to Age UK, nearly a third of over-75s are living in poverty or just above the poverty line. If the free over-75 TV licence is scrapped, finding the money needed to pay that additional bill will be impossible for those struggling to make ends meet. At a time when social isolation and loneliness are on the rise, that could mean the loss of their main form of company.

I want to put on the record the views of some of my constituents who got in touch after I issued a consultation for over-75s on this issue. One constituent told me: “It is often the only company that I have, and I feel as though if it were to be scrapped then it will be penalising those who have already contributed many years towards the country”.

Another wrote: “I, like many other people over 75, have worked and paid tax and insurance for approximately 60 years. Many of these people are on small pensions and we have served the country with dignity and honour. The TV may be the only form of entertainment and to scrap the licence is a kick in the teeth and a disgusting move”.

I agree wholeheartedly with my constituents. The TV licence is an important benefit for pensioners, who suffer disproportionately from loneliness and social isolation. If TV licences are ended or means-tested, millions of older people, almost half of whom consider television their main source of company, will have to pay to keep the little company they do have.

The Government were elected on a manifesto promise to maintain all pensioner benefits, including TV licences. Those who have given so much to our country deserve better than broken Tory promises. When will the Government admit that they must do right by over-75s in this country, stand by their promises and take back responsibility for the TV licence?

3.36 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid). I am pleased to speak in this important debate, which I thank my hon.
[Tracy Brabin]

Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) for securing, and which is timely, considering that a decision is expected next month on the future of free TV licences for over-75s.

We have heard powerful contributions from across the House that have demonstrated how damaging it would be for older people if the Government broke their 2017 manifesto commitment. In my constituency alone, 6,000 older people would lose out if the free TV licence were scrapped. I am sure many in the House will be familiar with Age UK’s deeply troubling report released last month, “Struggling on: Experiences of financial hardship in later life”. It details the shameful fact that 2 million pensioners now live in poverty—a shocking increase of more than 300,000 in the past five years—and that almost 1 million say they are one bill away from financial disaster, unable to find enough money to cover an unexpected bill of £200. If we have almost 1 million older people just a bill away from ruin, how on earth do we expect them to find £150+ plus for something they have never had to budget for? Age UK researchers found that scrapping free TV licences could push more than 50,000 pensioners into poverty—and now the Government expect them to find another £150.

I am going to make this slightly personal now. My mum, Betty, is 88 years old. Like many of my constituents, she has lived alone for the last 15 years, and like others, she is involved with various community groups in the week, but that takes up perhaps one or two hours each day. The TV is undoubtedly more than just a box in the corner of the living room; it is a companion and it is entertainment. It is also a great conversation starter when people attend church or lunch club. “Deal or No Deal” keeps brains sharp. The news keeps us connected. “Line of Duty” keeps people on the edge of their seats. Betty, my mum, is in the fortunate position of being able to pay for her TV licence if she had to, but many in Batley and Spen are not.

My mum is one of over 3.6 million older people in the UK living alone, 2 million of whom are over 75. Over 1 million of them say the TV is their main source of companionship. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of people who can go a week without speaking to another human being; people who might not have any interest in subscription-only channels and rely only on terrestrial TV; people for whom the TV is their friend, who might now have to choose between companionship and heating the house. It is a choice that will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and create profound loneliness.

Thanks to the work of organisations such as Age UK, the Royal Voluntary Service and the Jo Cox Foundation, we have increased our understanding of loneliness by leaps and bounds. We now know that millions of older people are lonely, and the Government have shown leadership and a commitment to ending loneliness by giving us a loneliness Minister, so why on earth would they inflict such a devastating blow on the most vulnerable, while outsourcing the financial burden to the BBC—a burden that they know full well it cannot meet without making cuts elsewhere? The National Union of Journalists has said that such a burden, which would amount to £1 billion by the end of the next decade, would be “catastrophic” for the broadcaster.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful and important speech. Does she agree that what we are talking about is a valuable friend to so many lonely, perhaps elderly, people? We are talking about Auntie: we are talking about the BBC. By effectively cutting its funding, we are damaging the lives of people who listen to the radio, watch television, and depend on quality output from the BBC.

Tracy Brabin: I could not agree more. I am 100% behind what my hon. Friend has said. This is not just about being able to make brilliant programmes that challenge international players such as Netflix, Amazon and Sky; it is about giving the BBC the money to fund fresh talent pipelines and support local news, radio, and educational channels such as CBBC, CBeebies, Bitesize and Writers Room. We must not forget that the BBC is the only body that has an obligation to prove that it has entry-level schemes for people around the country and not just in London, which is important to many working-class young people in particular.

“A disgrace” and “deeply unfair” are two of the ways in which respondents characterised this move, and these are echoed in my inbox by many constituents. I am proud that the Labour party introduced free TV licences for the over-75s in 2000, and I believe it is shameful for the Government now to pass the buck to the BBC. The solution is clear, and it is in the Government’s gift: they should honour the promise that they made in 2017. David Attenborough, our national treasure, who spoke last month, when I visited Age UK in Wandsworth, and I know that nine years of austerity has made it even worse. Older people are losing the social care support that they need to live active lives, and they also have limited access to leisure and social activities.

Last month, when I visited Age UK in Wandsworth, I spoke to staff and volunteers. They do fantastic work supporting older people in Battersea, and they are all too aware of the growing problem of loneliness and isolation among older people. Research shows that the main source of company for 40% of older people is the television. It was nothing short of cruel for the Government to open the door to ending free TV licences for over-75s and causing yet more loneliness.

The effects of this move would be considerable. It could hit more than 3,500 households in my constituency, and nearly 4 million households across the country. According to research conducted by Age UK, more than 2 million over-75s will be forced either to go without TV or to cut back on other essentials such as heating or even meals if the concession is scrapped, and 50,000 people will be pushed below the poverty line. As with so many Government cuts, disabled people will be severely hit. There are 1.6 million disabled people over 75,
many of whom have mobility issues, struggle to leave their homes, and rely on this concession. It was a Labour Government who introduced free TV licences in 2000 as part of the wider support package for our elderly, and for this Government to simply cut them after nine years of austerity is wrong and will only make the situation worse.

It is not just that: as my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) said, the Government are breaking their manifesto promise to retain TV licence support for the duration of this Parliament. They made that promise in their manifesto, but are breaking it so quickly. As my hon. Friend said in his opening speech, we have got into this mess because the Government are outsourcing their responsibilities for the licence fee concession to the BBC. The BBC is a public broadcaster; it is not there to administer social concessions—it is not its job to do that.

At the same time the Government are squeezing the BBC’s funding, which in effect means that the Government are trying to devolve responsibility and blame for their cuts; the cuts are political choices. The Prime Minister has said that austerity is over, but we on the Opposition Benches know it is not. However, the Government can prevent yet another devastating effect of their austerity programme: they can honour their 2017 manifesto commitment and fund the TV licence concession for over-75s. For the sake of my Battersea constituents and all those who rely on the concession, I urge the Minister not to go ahead with this cut.

3.46 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), and I agree with all of her comments and those made by others on the Opposition Benches.

I am pleased that we are having this debate today about a welfare provision that is currently received by more than 7,000 older people in Crewe and Nantwich—and I stress that this is a welfare provision. Effectively to outsource responsibility for welfare policy to the BBC, an organisation that is supposed to be independent of Government, is cynical and irresponsible. I am deeply concerned about the impact this decision will have on the older people I represent.

As we have heard, four in 10 older people say that television is their main source of company. Last year, the Prime Minister launched the Government’s first loneliness strategy, saying: “This strategy is only the beginning of delivering a long and far-reaching social change in our country—but it is a vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes.”

The Prime Minister also set out a number of commitments, including adding loneliness to the ministerial portfolio at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and promising to incorporate loneliness into ongoing policy decisions with a view to a loneliness policy test being included in the Department’s plans. Can the Minister tell the House today whether this decision passed that test?

In addition to my concern that this decision will exacerbate our national loneliness crisis, I am concerned that it comes at a time when progress in tackling pensioner poverty has stalled. The estimated cost of funding this provision is more than the BBC’s current annual spend on all its radio services, and far more than it currently spends on its children’s television services, CBBC and CBeebies. It is difficult to see how the BBC can ever fund this provision with its current level of funding without a significant impact on the range or quality of services it provides.

I am also concerned about the impact this decision could have on the wider UK creative industries. A report in 2015 concluded that the BBC directly invests more than £1.2 billion outside the organisation, benefiting at least 2,700 different creative suppliers. In addition, the skills and experience gained by those working at and with the BBC inevitably go on to benefit the whole sector, which made a record contribution of more than £100 billion to the UK economy in 2017.

Finally, however, I return to the point I made at the beginning of my contribution: the free TV licence for over-75s is a welfare provision. Political decisions regarding the future of any such provision surely rest with the Government and with the Department for Work and Pensions.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Would it not be wrong for the Government to take a means-tested approach to the subsidy of TV licences for the over-75s, on the basis that the process would probably cost them more to administer than they would save?

Laura Smith: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s comment, and I am pleased to see that his party is standing with us today in saying that what the Government have done is wrong. I will continue with my comments and come back to that point in a second, if that is okay.

The Conservative party seemed to recognise the important fact that the free TV licence for over-75s was a welfare provision when it made a political promise to voters in its 2017 manifesto. To quote the manifesto directly, the Conservatives promised to “maintain all other pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this Parliament.”

But we know that the Government had already set the stage for scrapping free TV licences back in 2015, which raises the question: why did they make that promise in 2017? How many of those other benefits can we expect to see outsourced as the Government continue to shirk their responsibilities to our pensioners?

Perhaps the most concerning factor is that this is just one of the Government’s abject failures to stand up for older people in our communities. Alongside our loneliness crisis and the worrying signs around pensioner poverty, we have had a social care crisis that has simply been ignored. Years after they first promised a social care Green Paper, and after several delays, we still have not seen one. Professor Martin Green, the chair of the International Longevity Centre and chief executive of Care England, described the UK as “completely and institutionally ageist” in December last year. Today, the Government must acknowledge their failings and take the first steps towards restoring trust in politics by committing to honouring their promises to voters and funding free TV licences.

3.52 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), and I want to...
begin where she left off. I agree with her that free TV licences were introduced as a welfare policy. That is very much how it was seen at the time, alongside benefits such as free bus passes and free eye tests. The Government’s decision to pass responsibility for this on to the BBC in the knowledge that the BBC would be under this kind of pressure has two impacts. The first is on the BBC itself; the other is on the pensioners who receive the benefit at the moment.

Passing this responsibility on to the BBC is the policy equivalent of a hospital pass. The Government know that the BBC is under pressure. At the moment, the policy costs some £660 million a year, rising to more than £700 million in a couple of years’ time, and asking the BBC to fund this out of its own resources will leave it facing a cut of around one fifth of its budget. As has been said, that is the equivalent of the budgets for BBC Two, BBC Three, BBC Four, the BBC News channel and the children’s channels. This will have a major impact and major implications for our national public service broadcaster at the very moment when the broadcasting and entertainment environment is changing and the BBC is under more pressure than ever from Netflix, Amazon and other providers. The direct impact of this on the BBC is that it will be faced with the awful choice of cutting quality or hitting pensioners.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr McFadden: I am not going to give way, if that is okay, because there is a lot of pressure on time and others want to speak.

The first impact of the policy will be on the BBC itself. The second impact will be on pensioners, and it will be a dual impact—financial and social. The House of Commons Library estimates that there are around 5,600 households in my constituency with someone who is 75 or over. Looking at the options in the BBC consultation, we see that if the free BBC TV licence were restricted to pension credit recipients, 3,390 of those households would lose out, to the tune of £154 a year. If the qualifying age were raised to 80, around 2,200 households would lose out.

It has been said that we should means-test and restrict the benefit to those on pension credit. We are asked, “After all, what about the very wealthy pensioner with a huge estate?” The problem is that, as with changes to any universal benefit, it will not be just the pensioner with a huge estate who loses out. It is estimated that some 40% of pensioners entitled to pension credit do not receive it. If we go down the road suggested, not only the pensioner with the huge wealth will lose out, but some of the poorest pensioners in my constituency and the other constituencies that have been mentioned in the debate.

Then there is the social and cultural impact of cutting much-needed entertainment and information. What is the Government’s justification? The Minister came close to saying in opening that the change was a consequence of the financial crisis and that the Government were ultimately asking pensioners, some of them the lowest-income pensioners in the country, to pay the cost of it 10 years on. That would be unjust and unfair to pensioners in my constituency.

The free TV licence is, after all, a benefit. The Government should fund it and keep the manifesto promise they made in 2017 to maintain it. They have told us that austerity is over. What better way to start proving that than by changing their minds about the TV licence fee?

The debate is not just a party political joust. Let me act for a moment as the Under-Secretary’s political adviser and give him some friendly advice. If the Government go down this road, they will incur the wrath and lasting anger of pensioners, who have come to expect and are used to this benefit after the 20 or so years of its existence. It will do the Government no good to claim at the next election, “It wasn’t us; it was the BBC.” There is no evading the responsibility for the decision. It comes from and is owned by the Government, and the Government will pay the political price if they proceed with this policy.

3.57 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I think it was Mark Durkan who once described Opposition day debates as a bit like a silent disco. Today’s debate is literally becoming a silent disco as it goes on.

I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who have led the proceedings superbly and conveyed the feelings of the over-75s.

I particularly enjoyed the bit of the debate when my good friend the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) rumbled the distortions in the Scottish Conservative party crib sheet. Scottish Conservative Members told us earlier that all the Opposition parties and the Government went through the Lobby arm in arm, suggesting that it was okay to hand over the costs of the free TV licence to the BBC. It would be fair to say that the hon. Gentleman sent the Scottish Tories “homeward and back”.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) mentioned several quality TV programmes, and got to the heart of the debate. Should those who are 75 or over watch for free quality programmes such as “Pointless”, “Match of the Day” or that great classic, “Poldark”, or will the modern-day Warleggans oppose them to pay £154.50 a year to do so? We have heard a muddled position from Government Back Benchers so far. They say that not all those who are 75 or over should get free TV licences. Two Government Back Benchers, one a former Secretary of State, suggested that there are lots of millionaires over 75 and should pay the TV licence fee. I guess they know more millionaires than I do, but they gave no figures to show just how many of those aged over 75 are millionaires. The other suggestion was that many over-75s live in households where there are three, four or even more working adults, though again no figures were presented.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Like me, he knows that there are probably no millionaires living in Carntyne or Sandyhills, and that the Minister is entirely out of touch. Does he think it is just a bit strange that, in 2014, when Unionist parties were going round Glasgow telling people how great the UK is, they did not mention anyone losing their TV licences?
Chris Stephens: That is absolutely true. There was no suggestion that over-75s would lose their TV licences.

Let us examine some figures from some written answers about the cost to the public purse of providing free television licences to people over the age of 75. In the Glasgow South West constituency, the cost to the public purse is £700,000; in the Glasgow city local authority area, it is £4 million; and for Scotland, it is £50.5 million. In other words, BBC Scotland is being asked to find £50.5 million in its budget for the free TV licences.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—

Chris Stephens: I give way to my constituency neighbour. BBC Scotland has its headquarters in her constituency.

Alison Thewliss: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. As the MP for Pacific Quay, I see the value of the high-end jobs based in BBC Scotland. The investment that the BBC has made in the new BBC Scotland channel has created jobs in the wider economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that removing that money from the budget would put at risk that brand-new venture?

Chris Stephens: I agree, and I have explored that with the shadow Secretary of State. I have very real concerns about the future of the creative industry, especially about employment in the BBC and its capacity to produce good-quality programmes if it is asked to bear the cost of the free TV licence. I sit on the all-party Youth Violence Commission, so I know that there are key benefits to young people finding employment in the creative industries. That is important, so we must continue to advocate and argue for it.

Many hon. Members mentioned loneliness and social inclusion as reasons why people over 75 should receive a TV licence. I agree. We are already seeing the impact of high and rising fuel bills on pensioners—particularly those who live alone. Age Scotland and Age UK report that six in 10 pensioners who live alone have difficulties paying their fuel bills. The number with health conditions and disabilities is increasing. More than four fifths of people aged 85 and over report that their daily lives are limited by a long-term health problem or a disability. Those things have a real impact because there are numerous extra costs associated with them, including taxis to medical appointments, medical equipment, and support and care, so it seems ludicrous that the Government are saying that people aged 75 and over will have to cough up for a TV licence. It really is incredible.

As Opposition Members rightly said, this commitment was in the 2017 Conservative party manifesto, and the Government then allowed the BBC to have a consultation. I did not hear from the Minister—perhaps he will tell us when he winds up—whether the Government will ignore the BBC consultation because they have a manifesto commitment not to take free TV licences off people aged 75 or over. If they will, they need to say so this afternoon.

4.3 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to debate free TV licences for over-75s. My mam, who I know will be watching, as a lot of pensioners do—I am sure lots of people besides our mams will be watching the Parliament channel—is very passionate about this issue because she is turning 75 in January. To her, this is personal, as she keeps telling me. She feels it has been done deliberately to give her a hard time. It is also personal to the thousands of pensioners who will be worse off if the free TV licence for over-75s is revoked, curtailed or means-tested.

In March, I hosted and addressed the National Pensioners Convention in Parliament for its rally on the BBC’s consultation. I share all of their frustrations about these proposed changes, because I know—I heard this at the rally, from the pensioners—how important their TVs are to their everyday lives. That is why I contributed to the BBC’s consultation in February this year. I have received notification that my letter will be included in the consultation document, so I hope all my points will be taken on board by the BBC and, in turn, listened to by the Government.

The introduction of free TV licences in 2000 for those aged over 75 was one of the many great achievements of the last Labour Government. That is why I and many of my colleagues opposed the Conservative Government’s outsourcing of this social benefit to the BBC as part of its 2015 royal charter. As we have heard, the cost to the BBC is roughly equivalent to the total it currently spends on all of BBC Two, BBC Three, BBC Four, the BBC news channel, CBBC and Cbeebies, so I strongly disagree with what the Prime Minister said at last week’s Prime Minister’s questions in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). She said that “there is no reason why the BBC, with the money made available to it, is not able to continue that.”—[Official Report, 1 May 2019, Vol. 659, c. 203.]

I am incredulous that the Prime Minister really believes the BBC can fund all of this without detriment. Even to try to do so would be extremely detrimental to the content the BBC is able to offer, and risks causing immense damage to the quality of the service that we all currently enjoy.

I agree with BECTU—the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union—which has said, in opposing the proposals to scrap or limit free TV licences: “as a welfare benefit, meeting the cost of free licence fees should be the duty of the government”.

It is a disgrace that the Government not only feel able to wash their hands of the responsibility for providing this welfare policy, but are now refusing to rule out breaking the commitment they made in the 2017 Conservative manifesto to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s up to 2022. More than 5,000 households in my constituency are eligible for a free TV licence as they have someone over the age of 75. I am sure that those households will feel let down and unable to trust the Conservative Government if their free TV licence is taken away.

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The BBC is under a lot of pressure in respect of new services, and has introduced BBC Sounds, on-demand services and social media services. These services are less likely to be used by the over-75s, but the Government expect the BBC to introduce these services and take away the benefit for over-75s or take the costs. This cannot stand. Does she not agree that the Government need to pay for this, because the BBC needs to continue to innovate?
Mrs Hodgson: Exactly. I am pleased that my hon. Friend has made that intervention to make that point. The BBC needs to move forward and get better. This move would be to its detriment. It would be a huge backward step in terms of what the BBC would be able to provide in the future, and it just makes no sense.

As we have heard over and over again from Members in all parts of the House, the BBC is much more than just entertainment. Loneliness is blighting the lives of people across the country, with four in 10 people saying that their television is their main source of company. If the Government were serious about tackling the issue of social isolation, they would not be continuing their devastating programme of austerity cuts that affect the most vulnerable in our society. If free TV licences are ended, curtailed or means-tested, millions of older people, who suffer disproportionately from social isolation, will have to pay to keep the little company they have. I feel as though the Minister, his Parliamentary Private Secretary and the Whip are suffering social isolation today in this Chamber, because, as you will notice, Madam Deputy Speaker, they are the only ones here—here because of their roles. I do not think we could have any fewer Conservatives in the Chamber and be allowed to continue!

As with so many of the Government’s policies, this is yet another cruel attack on the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. The Government must be honest with the country; austerity is not over. That is proved by the fact that the Minister said in her opening remarks that this policy change was dreamed up under the original austerity plans of Osborne—or rather, the former Chancellor—and it is just being implemented now. If austerity is really over, why can the Government not just drop this hugely unpopular and unfair cut?

As we have heard, the licence fee concession was guaranteed to be safe until at least 2022 in the Conservative manifesto. The Government are shirking their responsibility, breaking their promises and punishing pensioners. They must stop passing the buck, accept their basic moral duty, and stick by the manifesto commitment on which all Government Members were elected. That is probably why the majority of them are not present to front this up—because they cannot. The Government need to properly fund TV licences for the over-75s, and they need to do it now.

4.10 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson)—and hello to her mum.

Older people across my constituency will be watching this important debate closely. Recent election results have shown that public trust in politicians has fallen to historic lows. I am surprised that the Government have decided to further erode the public trust by breaking their promise on free TV licences for the over-75s. As we have already heard, there was a clear commitment in the 2017 Conservative party manifesto that free licences would be protected until the end of this Parliament, which is currently scheduled for 2022. That promise to our pensioners is now in tatters. The Government have chosen to outsource responsibility and the financial burden of free licences to the BBC—“Let’s blame the BBC.” The BBC cannot cope with the costs and has been going through a consultation process on the future of free licences, and they now look set to be curtailed or completely scrapped by 2020.

The options in the BBC consultation will have a negative impact on households throughout my constituency. Locally, some 2,000 households will lose their free licences if the qualifying age is raised to 80; some 3,000 will lose their free licences if a mean test based on pension credit is introduced; and nearly 5,000 will lose out if free licences are ended entirely. My constituents will be paying the price of the Government’s cynical decision to make a promise that they had no intention of keeping.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and it is telling that there is no one really on the Government Benches to listen to it. That tells us about their shamefacedness in neglecting this debate and the important points raised. Not only are we facing pensioner poverty, which will only be increased by changes to the concession, but pensioners face significant social exclusion, especially in my constituency. For many, the only way they connect to the world is through television. Surely taking away the concession and putting the financial burden on pensioners will further alienate our pensioner population.

Hugh Gaffney: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Government’s failure to keep their promise will also lead to greater loneliness among Scottish pensioners. Age Scotland has highlighted the fact that 100,000 older people feel lonely all or most of the time, with half of over-75s saying that their main form of company is the TV or a pet. I recently visited my dad. I asked him whether I could switch his telly over to another channel, and he said that he only puts the telly on to hear voices. He is 80 years old. Dad, I will make more visits.

Let us not forget that more than half of over-75s do not use the internet and greatly rely on television for news. The Government will therefore be forcing older people throughout Scotland into digital exclusion. We should not be surprised by yet another broken promise from this Government to the elderly. We need only look at the way that the WASPI women have been treated—I will continue to support their campaign for justice. The Government continue to pursue pension credit changes, which will hit the finances of mixed-age couples across Scotland. I call on the Government to learn from their past failures and to take immediate steps to protect free TV licences for the over-75s, or pensioners will rightly conclude that this is a Government that fails to look after their interests and their welfare and they will let you know how they think at the ballot box.
I have spoken to retired members from the Communications Workers Union and Unison. They have worked hard all their life and have earned the right to enjoy their retirement, which for them includes a free TV licence.

4.15 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): We have had a very good debate with some excellent contributions from the Back Benches. Like other hon. Members, I wish to declare an interest at the outset, which is that although I do not qualify for the concession myself—a fact that is well known by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon, the former Secretary of State. The right hon. Member for Maldon, as we share a birthday, having been born on the same date in the same year—my mother does. Like the parents of other hon. Members, she is, with her free television licence in hand, a keen follower of the BBC Parliament channel. Like others, she could perhaps afford to pay for her television licence, but she is a miner’s daughter who left school at 14 and worked hard in a factory all her life. It is the sort of concession that is extremely important to someone living on their own at that age. As other hon. Members have pointed out, it can be very lonely for those people. We should bear it in mind that there will probably be many people taking an interest in our proceedings today—I am told that there are often dozens watching the BBC Parliament channel—including many from the over-75s bracket.

We have had some excellent speeches today, including that of the right hon. Member for Maldon, the former Secretary of State. I thought he tried to give the impression that the BBC was delighted with the deal that was struck back in 2015, even though it has been described by others as a hospital pass. I am afraid that nobody really believes that, and deep down, I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman does either. He is entitled, I suppose, to believe that ultimately there should not be a licence fee, which is what he said—he felt that it was unsustainable. However, knowing him as I do, if he wanted that to happen he would probably believe that it should have been in his party’s manifesto, and that it should have been consulted on, because it would be a major change in Government policy. Similarly on this—the potential ending of the free concession on the TV licence for the over-75s—it should have been in the manifesto if the intention was to end the free television licence concession, rather than pretending in the manifesto that it will be maintained rather than outsourced to the BBC.

Mr Whittingdale: To some extent I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I remind him that the charter review, which was carried out in 2015-16, was the subject of the biggest public consultation in the history of public consultations in terms of the number of responses that were received. Obviously, the same degree of interest will be generated before the next charter.

Kevin Brennan: We also know what actually happened in relation to the free television licence concession. Basically, as I will say later in my remarks, the BBC hierarchy were taken into a darkened room, rubber hoses were taken out by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, a punishment beating was administered, and they came out making the hostage statement that had been prepared for them, which was that they were delighted with the outcome of these negotiations. I note that the right hon. Gentleman laughs at that, so perhaps my description is not as far-fetched as it might sound.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) pointed out that she could make the shortest speech on parliamentary record if the Government would simply honour their manifesto. We could have done without having this debate today. We would not have needed to be here at all if the Government had actually made real the words of their 2017 manifesto. Instead, as she said, they have used this smoke and mirrors approach to avoid their real responsibilities.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who is unfortunately not in his place at the moment, worked for the BBC for many years and often participates in our discussions about the BBC. He said that the 2015 deal with the BBC represented, from the BBC’s point of view, “all their Christmases come at once”. Well, I do not think that it was actually the intention of the former Secretary of State that the BBC should walk away from that negotiation thinking that all its Christmases had come at once; in conjunction with the former Chancellor, it was quite the opposite. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the deal on the funding for the future of the BBC, it was wrong in principle to pass on responsibility for this social policy to the unelected, unaccountable and undemocratic BBC.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making a very important point about this classic insidious strategy that involves attacking core public services—the strategy of defunding, claiming a service is dysfunctional and then using it as an excuse to privatise. We have seen that happen not just with the pensioner costs being borne by the BBC instead of the state, but also with the defunding of the overseas World Service by the Foreign Office, which resulted in major damage to Britain’s international profile.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend accurately describes what is often the modus operandi of this Conservative Government.

The hon. Member for North Devon also said that the BBC had agreed to continue the concession, but that is not true. In the end, the BBC was forced to agree to take on the concession, but with the right to change it. That is the essence of why we are here today—because the BBC is consulting on doing that, and that agreement was made with the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) was one of many Members who pointed out that her mother watched the Parliament channel and was probably watching our proceedings today. I am sure that she would have enjoyed my hon. Friend’s excellent speech, in which she pointed out the importance of the free TV licence concession to older people.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said that he had not intended to make a speech and was only prompted to do so by his own intervention on the shadow Secretary of State, in which he asked him whether, in principle, a multimillionaire should receive a free TV licence. In response to that, I asked him during his speech whether a multimillionaire should receive free NHS treatment. It is true of any universal benefit that it is available to all; that is the underpinning principle of a universal benefit. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly
entitled to make the argument that the TV licence should not be a universal benefit to over-75s. I disagree profoundly with that argument, but it is a perfectly respectable one and he is entitled to make it; but he is not entitled to palm that decision off on the BBC. That is the essence of the argument today. Just like the former Secretary of State, the hon. Gentleman said that he wants ultimately to abolish the licence fee. Well, if that is what he wants, I hope that he would agree that he should come here as he did today and argue for it, put it in his manifesto, put it to the people at an election and see whether they support his proposal.

James Cartlidge: We do not have time today to go into this issue in the detail that one would want, but let me say that the NHS is profoundly about risk-sharing. Even a multimillionaire would not be able to afford the huge cost they could face if they had to pay for NHS care for a whole manner of conditions. The TV licence is a set fee of £157, and the hon. Gentleman is arguing that someone who owns vast acres and many mansions should get that for free.

Kevin Brennan: As I said, the hon. Gentleman is entitled to make that argument but is not entitled to palm the decision off on the BBC. That is the essence of our point.

My old university friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan)—who is still, I think, the distinguished chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the BBC—said that George Osborne is the villain of the piece. I think that many of us can agree with that, in many ways. I am looking forward to the rapturous coverage of my hon. Friend’s speech in the Evening Standard tomorrow. He said that his majority is currently 249, I think. I am sure that he is going to romp home after his speech today when his older constituents read how he so ably supported them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) pointed out that for over-75s living alone, TV can literally be a lifeline. She mentioned the amount of money that will be taken out of the pockets of people in her constituency. That is the essential point. If this concession is ended, people in an already hard-pressed community will have to pay in full for their TV licence. That is money that should not be taken out of communities that are struggling at the moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) read out some of the quotes from constituents who had written to him and pointed out that they understand what the Government are up to and will not be fooled by the approach they are taking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) knows a lot about TV. Like my brother, she has appeared as an actor on “Coronation Street”, and she knows what she is talking about when she says that TV is a friend to the lonely. The work that she has continued with the Jo Cox Foundation, which she mentioned, is to be commended. It is a pity that the Government are not rethinking their approach in the light of all the evidence about loneliness and older people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) accused the Government of devolving their political responsibility for the cuts, and she is absolutely right—that is exactly what they are doing. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) pointed out that 7,000 people in her constituency receive this welfare provision, as she rightly called it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) correctly pointed out that this policy has two effects—on the BBC through the hospital pass that it has been given, and on pensioners in the form of the stealth tax that it will represent if the Government do not act. He also pointed out that 40% of people entitled to pension credit do not receive it, so there will be a double whammy for them. He mentioned the Government’s claim that austerity is over and gave them some political advice. I knew him when he was a political adviser to the former Labour Government, so I would advise the Minister to listen very carefully to what he said, because the Government will pay a political price if they do not.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) quoted “Flower of Scotland” when referring to the fact that I pointed out that his Scottish Conservative colleagues had been completely wrong when they said that we—his party and my party—had not opposed this measure during the passage through this place of the Digital Economy Act. I can add to what I said about the Committee stage. On 28 November 2016, my colleagues and I tabled an amendment on Report in which we also opposed this measure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) told us about her own representations to the BBC’s consultation. I hope that it will listen to what she said, but more importantly, I hope that the Government will listen, because ultimately that is where the responsibility lies. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) rightly said that this was a “Let’s blame the BBC” policy, and that his constituents would pay the price for the Government’s cynical breach of their promise.

I remind the House that we have consistently opposed this underhand stealth tax on older people and the creative sector. We strongly support the excellent campaign that has been run on this by many of my hon. Friends, but also by publications such as the Daily Mirror. It is wrong to outsource social policy to an unelected organisation whose historical mission is to entertain, educate and inform the country, not to decide who should be the beneficiaries of Government social policy. But if the Government believe that that should be part of the BBC’s role, they should have argued for it. They could have put in their manifesto—

Mrs Hodgson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kevin Brennan: Not for the moment.

The Government could have put in their manifesto that they intended to outsource to the BBC—an organisation that is not democratically accountable—a concession intended to help older citizens. They did not do that. They could have consulted civic society, such as the National Pensioners Convention, which my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) mentioned—I am sorry that I cannot give way to her at this point—or Age UK, which said in its briefing for the debate:

“Age UK firmly believes it is the Government’s responsibility to look after vulnerable older people, not the BBC’s.”
Did they do that? No. Did they have the courage to make the argument for cutting the money that pays for free TV licences for the over-75s? No. Instead, they took the craven path of taking BBC management into a dark room, with the cynical intention of offloading their responsibility for helping older people on to our national broadcaster. The shear brazenness of it is something to behold, even for the Tories. When combined with a promise in the party’s manifesto to maintain a concession that it has already offloaded to a reluctant third party, it is even more brazen. You cannot pass the parcel with social policy like this and call yourself a responsible Government.

The Government say that this is now a matter for the BBC, but they hope and expect the concession to stay. That is cynical. They say that the BBC willingly agreed to take over responsibility for the licence fee concession, but only in the same way that the victim of a robbery agrees to hand over their wallet with a gun pressed against their head. The Government’s whole approach to this has been underhand, aggressive and based on bullying. Many Members here today have been involved in trade unions as members, representatives or officials, so we know what a negotiation looks like, and this was no negotiation. It is the kind of politics that gives politicians a bad name. If the Conservatives want to rid themselves of the cost of free TV licences, they should have the courage to say so and say that they are doing it.

This is a point of principle for us. We cannot accept a policy that takes responsibility for even a small part of our social security system away from Government and palms it off on an organisation with no accountability to the electorate. That is not principled political leadership. It is craven and cynical political opportunism, made worse by the false promises in the manifesto. Older people are not stupid. They will see this for what it is: a Tory stealth tax on the elderly, and a cynical, despicable ruse to pickpocket our older citizens.

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): I would like to thank all Members who have brought this debate to life with passion and enthusiasm. We have had some amateur dramatics from Labour Members that would no doubt impress a BBC talent scout; I suggest that those on the Labour Front Bench should audition. It is a testament to the respect that Members across the House have for the BBC and its vital role in our society that we can debate it with such vigour. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) was one of many who gave powerful speeches. This subject is particularly important when we consider the value of the BBC to all in our society, and particularly to those on the Labour Front Bench who recall that the director-general of the BBC said at the time that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was underhand, aggressive and based on bullying. Many Members here today have been involved in trade unions as members, representatives or officials, so we know what a negotiation looks like, and this was no negotiation. It is the kind of politics that gives politicians a bad name. If the Conservatives want to rid themselves of the cost of free TV licences, they should have the courage to say so and say that they are doing it.

This is a point of principle for us. We cannot accept a policy that takes responsibility for even a small part of our social security system away from Government and palms it off on an organisation with no accountability to the electorate. That is not principled political leadership. It is craven and cynical political opportunism, made worse by the false promises in the manifesto. Older people are not stupid. They will see this for what it is: a Tory stealth tax on the elderly, and a cynical, despicable ruse to pickpocket our older citizens.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): I would like to thank all Members who have brought this debate to life with passion and enthusiasm. We have had some amateur dramatics from Labour Members that would no doubt impress a BBC talent scout; I suggest that those on the Labour Front Bench should audition. It is a testament to the respect that Members across the House have for the BBC and its vital role in our society that we can debate it with such vigour. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) was one of many who gave powerful speeches. This subject is particularly important when we consider the value of the BBC to all in our society, and particularly to those on the Labour Front Bench who recall that the director-general of the BBC said at the time that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was underhand, aggressive and based on bullying. Many Members here today have been involved in trade unions as members, representatives or officials, so we know what a negotiation looks like, and this was no negotiation. It is the kind of politics that gives politicians a bad name. If the Conservatives want to rid themselves of the cost of free TV licences, they should have the courage to say so and say that they are doing it.

This is a point of principle for us. We cannot accept a policy that takes responsibility for even a small part of our social security system away from Government and palms it off on an organisation with no accountability to the electorate. That is not principled political leadership. It is craven and cynical political opportunism, made worse by the false promises in the manifesto. Older people are not stupid. They will see this for what it is: a Tory stealth tax on the elderly, and a cynical, despicable ruse to pickpocket our older citizens.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): I would like to thank all Members who have brought this debate to life with passion and enthusiasm. We have had some amateur dramatics from Labour Members that would no doubt impress a BBC talent scout; I suggest that those on the Labour Front Bench should audition. It is a testament to the respect that Members across the House have for the BBC and its vital role in our society that we can debate it with such vigour. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) was one of many who gave powerful speeches. This subject is particularly important when we consider the value of the BBC to all in our society, and particularly to those on the Labour Front Bench who recall that the director-general of the BBC said at the time that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was underhand, aggressive and based on bullying. Many Members here today have been involved in trade unions as members, representatives or officials, so we know what a negotiation looks like, and this was no negotiation. It is the kind of politics that gives politicians a bad name. If the Conservatives want to rid themselves of the cost of free TV licences, they should have the courage to say so and say that they are doing it.

This is a point of principle for us. We cannot accept a policy that takes responsibility for even a small part of our social security system away from Government and palms it off on an organisation with no accountability to the electorate. That is not principled political leadership. It is craven and cynical political opportunism, made worse by the false promises in the manifesto. Older people are not stupid. They will see this for what it is: a Tory stealth tax on the elderly, and a cynical, despicable ruse to pickpocket our older citizens.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If what the hon. Gentleman says is right, why did he put this in his manifesto? We have to come back to that: why did the Conservatives put it in their manifesto knowing that they were not going to honour it?

Michael Ellis: As I have said, it is a matter for the BBC to make this decision. It was right and proper that it properly consulted the public across a number of months—that was a substantial consultation, and I understand that there were a number of participants and a wide range of options were discussed.

This was a fair deal, and was part of a very fair deal for the BBC. Again, Opposition Members have not recalled that the director-general of the BBC said at the time that the settlement represented “a strong deal for the BBC” that provided “financial stability”. Parliament agreed—transferring responsibility for the concession was debated extensively during the passage through the House of the Digital Economy Act 2017. The House will therefore recognise that the Government have been clear about their expectations on this matter.

Again, I want to make it clear that the House agreed in 2017 that it would be for the BBC to decide on the future of this important concession, and it is right that we await the BBC’s decision next month. I very much look forward to seeing how the BBC will continue to support older people across the UK by providing them with companionship and a connection to the outside world.
**Chris Stephens:** Let us try to cut to the chase. If the BBC recommends something other than that the free TV licence for over-75s is maintained, will the Government intervene and say to the BBC that, no, in their view the over-75s should keep their free TV licence?

**Michael Ellis:** This is not the time for hypotheticals. The Government have made clear what is expected and hoped for, and we have confidence in the BBC. I want to make a point about another issue raised by several colleagues, which is loneliness and older people.

**Tom Watson:** To take the Minister back to his original point, there is nothing hypothetical about a manifesto pledge. Is he saying that if the BBC drops the concession, he cannot honour that pledge?

**Michael Ellis:** I am saying that we do not have the result yet. The BBC has not made a decision, so conjecture about what the BBC may or may not decide is just that—pure conjecture. The BBC is due to decide in June, and we will wait to see what it has to say.

Hon. Members have spoken about the importance of the licence fee concession in helping older people who experience loneliness, and I recognise that. The Government take loneliness very seriously, and we recognise that it affects a number of older people. That is why we have taken action. The Government’s loneliness strategy, which was launched by the Prime Minister late last year, is the first such strategy; it is this Government who are acting. As part of the strategy, the Government have committed to a range of policies to help to tackle one of the greatest public health challenges of our time. In my Department alone, for example, the Government have committed to maximising the power of digital tools to connect people, particularly concentrating on digital inclusion for older people and disabled adults. We have also committed to embedding tackling loneliness in our new £400,000 digital inclusion innovation fund, which was launched in September 2018.

We await the BBC’s decision on the licence fee concession, and it is right and proper that it has total independence in making that decision. For the reasons I have given, the Government remain committed to and respect the BBC as one of the essential institutions of this country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House calls on the Government to honour the Conservative party’s 2017 manifesto promise to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s for the duration of this Parliament by ensuring sufficient funding to do so and, should the BBC propose changes to the concession, to ensure that the proposed changes are subject to parliamentary consent.

---

**Select Committee Membership**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** We now come to motions 3, 4, 5 and 6 on the International Trade Committee, the Home Affairs Committee, the Justice Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee. With the leave of the House, I propose that we debate motions 3, 4, 5, and 6 together.

4.42 pm

**Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con):** I beg to move.

That Mr Chris Leslie be discharged from the International Trade Committee and Gareth Thomas be added.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** With this we shall consider the following motions:

Motion 4—*Home Affairs Committee*—

That Alex Norris and John Woodcock be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Janet Daby and Toby Perkins be added.

Motion 5—*Justice Committee*—

That Janet Daby be discharged from the Justice Committee and Andy Slaughter be added.

Motion 6—*Women and Equalities Committee*—

That Mr Gavin Shuker be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Stephanie Peacock be added.

**Bill Wiggin:** As the Chair of the Selection Committee, it is my responsibility to ensure that the Committee operates in accordance with the rules of the House. That is the case with motion 3, which I am moving in the usual way following its agreement by the Selection Committee. I do not have personal interests in moving it. It is a function of the fairness of the transparent and democratic system that allows Select Committees to continue their incredibly important work.

The Labour party has decided to change Select Committee membership, and it is for the House to confirm those changes. Unlike with General Committees, there is no Standing Order that requires Select Committees to be kept in proportion to the House at large. By mutual agreement, the membership of Select Committees is appointed in rough proportion to that of the House. That is why the Committee has discretion in proposing changes to Select Committee membership.

Across all Select Committees, MPs who come from neither of the main parties are slightly over-represented. Change UK—the Independent Group—is over-represented on Select Committees, compared with the number of members of the group in this House. Although that over-representation does not compel the Selection Committee to take action, it is enough to satisfy me that reducing that representation is in accordance with the practice of the House. I therefore move this motion for the approval of the House.

4.44 pm

**Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK):** I appreciate that we are discussing House matters, and I appreciate that the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) has the job of managing the membership of many Committees of the House.
The rules are not necessarily entirely set down—a lot is left to the usual channels. For those watching in the Public Gallery or elsewhere, the “usual channels” is the practice where the Whips from the main political parties decide among themselves how to proceed with business. That practice does not necessarily mean that other groupings, particularly new political parties, get a word in edgeways.

I have been a member of the International Trade Committee for several years. I have very much enjoyed attending the Committee, scrutinising trade policy and holding the Government to account. That is the job of Select Committees. My understanding of the 2010 Parliament reforms, when the usual channels were no longer responsible for selecting the Chairs or the membership of Select Committees, was of a general mood that Back Benchers should be given a freer say on the composition of Committees. There is an important difference between a Front-Bench role and a Back-Bench role. Front Benchers have a difficult job to do to ensure Government business is prosecuted. Those on the Opposition Front Bench have their set of policies to pursue, too. Most Members, however, are Back Benchers and it is important to recognise their independence.

The 2010 Select Committee reforms were supposed to mean that members of Committees were to be selected not by the Whips but by their respective party groups in ballots among Back Benchers. Importantly, the chairmanships of Select Committees were also given to Members across the House to ballot and to choose, free from that whipping arrangement. Select Committees have an important part to play. It would be a terrible shame if, by a lack of attention, we slipped back into the habit of the bad old days where the Front Benchers of the established parties end up carving up between them which Back Benchers can or cannot sit on Select Committees and then hold to account those very Front Benchers who are appointing them in the first place.

I accept, having left the Labour party in February, that the Labour party has its post-election allocation. I do not necessarily accept, however, that if independent Members are taken off Committees—we are not just talking about me, but my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) being taken off the Women and Equalities Committee, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) being taken off the Home Affairs Committee, and the recent loss of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) from the Foreign Affairs Committee—we have no right of redress. As a new political party, Change UK, we are not part of the usual channels conversations. It is strange that we have not been invited to join them. You might, Madam Deputy Speaker, draw your own conclusions on why that might be the case. There is quite a cosy cartel in the House of Commons between the main political parties. Why would any of those who hold the power ever wish to allow others to come into that and to see what happens within?

I believe the Select Committee system needs to be defended, and that is why I want to make the point today that being taken off the International Trade Committee is not my choice. I have done my duty as a Select Committee. I have tried my best to hold the Government to account, particularly in relation to Brexit. The creation of the new Department for International Trade has been a very choppy and rocky journey. The Secretary of State for International Trade made a number of pledges on its creation—for example, rolling over all 40 free trade agreements the EU had made with the rest of the world. For the past two years, I have taken it as my responsibility to hold the Secretary of State and his Ministers to account on whether those promises were going to be fulfilled. People might disagree with my particular take on Brexit, but it is important that members of the Committee take an independent view, and press and challenge Ministers on these issues.

Along with the other members of the International Trade Committee, who by and large operate in a non-partisan way, I have tried to look at: the UK’s inward investment policy issues; what is happening with the establishment of the new Trade Remedies Authority; what on earth has been going on with the Trade Bill, which of course has been kicked into the long grass over a very long period; what developments are taking place at the World Trade Organisation; how we are going to scrutinise trade agreements when they come forward and what transparency there will be; and what sort of trading arrangements we have with the Commonwealth and developing countries. All those are incredibly important issues. Our Select Committee spent a lot of time looking at the idea that there will be some fantastic trade deal between the UK and the USA. It was quite clear to me that the myths about that possibility needed to be tested and prodded; as we know, the realities are quite different.

The Committee has explored many issues, and I regret that I will not be able to continue that work, but I will try my best to continue to scrutinise trade policy from the Back Benches and on behalf of my party, Change UK. I thank and pay tribute to my colleagues on the Committee and to its Chair, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who has done such a sterling job of keeping it in operation.

It is a shame that we are letting independent voices on Select Committees slip away, and the public need to know what is going on. Change UK has only 11 hon. Members; we do not have the numbers to win Divisions in this place, and there are hundreds of other hon. Members in the main political parties who would not necessarily want us to continue to have a voice on Select Committees. There is therefore very little point in my pressing the motion to a Division, but I did not want to let it pass without saying my piece.

4.51 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I rise to speak because one of the motions before the House affects the Select Committee on Home Affairs. Our Committee has discussed the proposal that my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) be removed; I put on record the strong support expressed by all Committee members for his work, particularly on county lines and counter-terrorism. I must express our disappointment in the motion.

I do not want to get into a wider debate about the way in which places for Select Committee members are allocated, which our Committee has not discussed. Nor do I want to raise any questions about the hon. Members who have been put forward to serve on the Committee, both of whom are excellent Members of this House.
I simply want to record, on behalf of the Committee, its concern and its recognition of the important work that my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness has done.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK) rose—

Yvette Cooper: I was not planning to say any more, but I give way to the right hon. Lady.

Anna Soubry: Given what the right hon. Lady says, especially in the light of her prominence and her chairpersonship of the Committee, it seems unfortunate that she cannot speak to the Labour Whips—because that is what it comes down to—and secure the presence of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on it. If the entire Committee thinks that he should remain on it, why on earth can he not?

Yvette Cooper: I will not discuss on the Floor of the House the private discussions that I have had. I am simply expressing the views of our cross-party Committee on its behalf.

4.53 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I thank the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), for her speech. Under the circumstances, it is really good of her to speak out. I will really miss being on the Committee. She will continue to be a superb Chair, holding the Government to account while playing a significant role in keeping the show on the road regarding the Brexit negotiations.

This is a matter of regret. I am really passionate about pushing the Government to do more to tackle terrorism and—as my right hon. Friend noted—the scourge of county lines, which is deeply affecting my constituents in Barrow and Furness. I will continue to do that in other ways.

We will not force this to a vote, though it is a matter of regret that the Whips have chosen to do it. It was a matter of regret that so many people on the Labour Benches who are still my friends went through the Division Lobby to kick out of their positions people among whose friends they would still count themselves, but that is the situation we are in.

We talked in the last debate on this subject about the decades-long precedent that Members who leave their parties for whatever reason keep their places on Committees. If those of us who have left the Labour party, for certain reasons, had not been so outspoken about the unsuitability of the Leader of the Opposition for the post of Prime Minister, would he have insisted that the precedent be broken and that we be kicked off? I will not stop speaking out in this Chamber and beyond about the fact that the shadow Chancellor praised the strategy of the ballot, the bomb and the bullet and explicitly praised the IRA; about the fact that the Leader of the Opposition invited the political wing of the IRA into Parliament weeks after the Brighton bomb inflicted such damage, including tragedy in this House; or about how he has consistently sided with the enemies of this country against our national security, doing damage as he does so, in his position as Leader of the Opposition and previously as a Back-Bench MP. God help this country if he and his coterie are allowed to get their hands on the levers of power. The damage they would do to our national security does not bear thinking about.

Question put and agreed to.

HOME AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Alex Norris and John Woodcock be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Janet Daby and Toby Perkins be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

JUSTICE

Ordered,

That Janet Daby be discharged from the Justice Committee and Andy Slaughter be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Women and Equalities

Ordered,

That Mr Gavin Shuker be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Stephanie Peacock be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Business without Debate

DRAFT DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL (JOINT COMMITTEE): INSTRUCTION

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the Resolution of this House of 27 February, it be an instruction to the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill that it should report by 14 June 2019.—(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL) ACT 2018 (EXIT DAY) (AMENDMENT) (NO. 2) REGULATIONS

Ordered,

That the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (Exit Day) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2019 be referred to a delegated legislation committee.—(Jeremy Quin.)

COMMITTEES

SELECTION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Andrew Stephenson be discharged from the Selection Committee and Jeremy Quin be added.—(Jeremy Quin.)

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

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

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It has just been revealed to me in an e-mail that Clydesdale Bank plans to shut its Shettleston Road branch, which is in my constituency. Can you advise me what opportunities might be available
to me, as a constituency Member, to place on record
that people in Shettleston will not stand for this closure,
and that we will fight it every step of the way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I
thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He
has asked me a question to which I can give a very direct
answer. If he wishes to draw this important matter—and
I appreciate how important it is in his constituency—to
the attention of the House and of the appropriate
Minister, there are various ways in which he can do so. I
am sure that he will receive good advice from the Table
Office, and I am sure that we shall hear more of this
matter in the coming days.

Full-time Social Action

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

5.1 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful for the
opportunity to raise this issue, and I thank my colleagues
who have stayed for the debate. I also thank City Year
UK and the National Youth Agency for their important
work, and for their help with research.

I am pleased to have secured the debate, because
social action and volunteering form a significant part
of our national identity. We have all seen the value of
volunteers in our own constituencies. In Mansfield,
Mansfield Woodhouse and Warsop, our community
benefits from dedicated volunteers who give their time
to help a wide range of local charities and important
causes.

I have met so many wonderful volunteers since I was
elected that there are far too many for me to list
individually, so I hope that I will be forgiven if I miss
out some people, as I inevitably will. Let me, however,
pay tribute to all those involved in supporting Framework,
MIND, Mansfield Wildlife Rescue, The Beacon Project,
Hetty’s, NIDAS—Nottinghamshire Independent Domestic
Abuse Services—John Eastwood Hospice, the Shed youth
club in Warsop, and Mansfield Woodhouse Community
Development Group. There are many more third sector
and voluntary organisations in which people are giving
their time and money to support amazing work.

Volunteering is often life-changing for those who
participate in it. It can be incredibly fulfilling, and can
bring about real change in communities. As a younger
man, I was involved in scouting for more than 10 years.
Through schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh’s
Award programme, I became involved in all sorts of
voluntary work in communities, which helped my own
personal development. Social action and volunteering
can be a great way for young people to learn new skills,
built up valuable experience for their careers, and boost
their confidence and communication skills. As MPs, we
all know that volunteering in politics is just about the
only way to get involved and to end up where we are
today, in this place.

The debate centres on full-time volunteering, or social
action. Working on a full-time social action project has
a huge impact, and allows volunteers to immerse themselves
in a new challenge. I want to focus specifically on the
benefits for younger people, aged between 18 and 25,
who volunteer to tackle our country’s biggest challenges.
It is hugely worth while, and has two benefits: the
projects themselves make a difference, and the participants
gain useful skills and experiences.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I
congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate.
I have seen social action projects in my constituency at
first hand, at Baguley Hall Primary School. Alongside
the staff team, City Year UK does vital work in helping
to increase attendance, improve behaviour and outcomes,
and support pupils. Does the hon. Gentleman agree
with me, and with the Holliday report, that the Government
should be doing more to support social action, and to
recognise and encourage full-time volunteers?
Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and it is great to be able to recognise another group doing good work volunteering with social action. I agree that we can do more and I hope to touch on some of the opportunities as I progress.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The groups the hon. Gentleman has mentioned are to be commended. I have come across young people who help those with dementia—there is an interesting project in Coventry—and people who are blind. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that we can do more to reinstate youth clubs, which played a vital role in the past. Does he agree that the Government should have another look at that, because that might offer a way forward in addressing knife crime for example?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those examples and agree that youth work is important; I am very involved in that through the National Youth Agency, which I will touch on later.

Full-time volunteers help in a wide range of projects for charities such as City Year UK, Volunteering Matters, The Scout Association and the Wildlife Trusts. These include schemes to support disadvantaged children to get better grades at school, projects helping homeless people and all sorts of environmental projects as well as those we have heard about from colleagues. There is a huge range of options to suit different interests and each project ensures that the volunteer learns and develops skills.

However, despite a proud heritage of volunteering and community action in the UK, we are behind some other countries in terms of realising the full benefits of this. I want to touch on some examples of where this works well before looking at specific issues, including the impact on employability and barriers in our current legislation.

Countries such as Germany, France and the USA have recognised the value of youth full-time social action by creating national programmes for young adults which attract upwards of 100,000 participants per year. France set up a Service Civique programme in 2010; just eight years later it was attracting 140,000 participants and it seeks to expand even more this year.

These initiatives can attract such significant numbers of young people because of the quality of the offer. The programmes come with a guarantee of excellence, and volunteers can choose a full-time project in line with their interests and undertake work on the project for up to a year. In return they receive financial support so they can stay involved and incentives to complete the programmes. These rewards mean that even young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can participate.

In America the AmeriCorps programme YouthBuild has had notable success in engaging volunteers from low-income backgrounds. In 2014 a report indicated that 93% of volunteers who entered the programme did not have a high school credential. As I have often said before, university education is not the right path for all young people and I have concerns that we are pushing too many young people down an academic route. I would like to see full-time social action as a possible path into work for young people and would like to see it recognised by the Government as an opportunity to bridge the gap between formal education and employment.

These initiatives provide value for money for the Governments that invest in them. Evidence from the USA’s AmeriCorps programme shows that it returns $4 for $1 invested.

Evidence also shows that these projects improve youth employment and allow young people to explore different career paths while gaining experience and skills. Our Government have recognised the value of that on-the-job learning. Apprenticeships are a brilliant way to gain valuable experience, but volunteering is another path which offers young people the chance to learn skills and try different things.

Social action projects build resilience, improve communication skills, can be really creative and involve teamwork. These are the crucial skills that employers are looking for and which are required even in entry-level jobs. Particularly for those who have struggled with the academic side of school and left education with few qualifications, having work experience in a real-world setting can be genuinely life-changing.

City Year UK is a full-time social action charity that recruits 18 to 25-year-olds. Its programmes are proven to improve work-readiness and the employability of volunteers. Its latest report shows that 90% of alumni were in employment, education or training within three months of finishing the programme.

Under this Government youth unemployment has dropped substantially, including locally in my constituency of Mansfield. There are over 439,000 fewer young people out of work than in 2010, which is great as it means more young people have secured a job, but there is still more to do and I believe that social action is a good way to support those young people who are struggling to find work.

Having a recognisable Government-backed programme in place, rather than the current piecemeal approach, would ensure that businesses understand the experience and skills that young people had gained from their social action project, and it would become a recognisable achievement. While it is good that the Department for Work and Pensions recognises that volunteering can help people develop vital skills for work, I believe we could offer more support for people on full-time social action projects on a fixed term. Currently, full-time volunteers in England are categorised as not in education, employment or training—known as NEETs. In other words, they are seen as part of a problem that needs to be fixed. I believe it is time that the Government changed this status and did more to recognise the benefits of social action programmes. This is where simple changes could have a big effect. Even if we cannot offer financial support, we could remove barriers to participation that currently exist within our welfare system.

Unemployed people claiming jobseeker’s allowance or universal credit are required to spend a certain number of hours per week searching for work. While outside these hours claimants can spend time volunteering, the system could be more flexible for those engaged in worthwhile community projects. Ultimately the volunteering they do can contribute much more than the cost of benefits in many cases.

Universal credit claimants can have their required weekly work-search time, which is usually 35 hours, reduced by half to accommodate voluntary work, but it is still difficult to fit a full-time social action project
around 18 hours of jobseeking. That will not be right for everyone: a lot of people want to get straight in to work, and some need to be pushed to put the time and effort into finding work. There is an opportunity to support others, particularly young people, through programmes like this and to deliver positive long-term outcomes for communities and individuals. Simply adding another category to say that they are volunteering and doing something productive and positive rather than being NEET would be a good step forward.

Under current guidelines, the charities that young people volunteer for are also unable to offer training beyond the essentials required for their social action project. That means that any extra training around employability or additional support for the young volunteers is not allowed, which hinders the effectiveness of those programmes. We could easily relax some of those rules at no cost, to help charities to support their volunteers and remove some of the barriers to establishing full-time social action programmes with a clear element of the programme that focuses on employability.

In December 2016, the Government launched the full-time social action review, which was chaired by former chief executive of National Grid, Steve Holliday. Mr Holliday published his findings in January 2018, and they acknowledged that youth full-time social action plays an important role in meeting many governmental priorities including social mobility, inclusion, careers education and skills development. The review called on the Government to better support, encourage and recognise full-time volunteers. It made several recommendations on how to achieve this, but I am keen to focus on what I believe is the most significant of the recommendations, which is to introduce a full-time social action pilot scheme for young people. The creation of a Government-backed pilot would be a huge step forward, and such a scheme might ultimately grow to emulate initiatives such as those in Germany, France and the USA. A Government-backed scheme would help to provide a new pool of easily identifiable, work-ready young people with real-world experience and a renewed sense of civic duty.

This kind of thing has regularly been discussed in Parliament. I have worked closely with the National Youth Agency as part of my work on the all-party parliamentary group for youth affairs and I am pleased that it supports Volunteering Matters in its call for HMRC to recognise full-time volunteering through awarding full national insurance credits. This would mean that volunteers did not lose out because they chose to volunteer and give back to their communities. I hope that the Government might also consider opportunities to support full-time social action using the Dormant Assets Youth Organisation, which has already committed to invest in programmes that help young people facing barriers to work. I would argue that a full-time social action programme would fit that remit perfectly. We also need to build on the APPG’s recommendations for investment in a youth workforce of professional youth workers and skilled volunteers to support social action projects and provide leadership and mentors for young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The National Youth Agency’s youth covenant is also worthy of support and recognition.

I am pleased that the Government support several programmes that enable volunteering opportunities, including the #iwill Fund, which aims to create more opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to volunteer, and the Connected Communities Innovation Fund, which aims to tackle barriers to volunteering and mobilise more people. These are important steps, but it is time to look again at the benefits of full-time volunteering.

Polling conducted by Censway on behalf of City Year UK in 2016 found that over 90% of those polled thought that a recognised programme of full-time voluntary civilian national service should be on offer for young people in Britain. Over half of the 16 to 25-year-olds polled said that that would definitely be an option for them, and nearly a third would consider signing up for such a programme if it were Government-backed. A programme like that has the potential to build a platform for young people from different regions and socioeconomic backgrounds to serve together side by side for a common purpose while restoring national pride and a sense of duty and service. There is also an opportunity here to work with young people who are disabled or have special educational needs, to offer mentoring and guidance, help in to work where that is possible, and other support that might currently be lacking.

The Government’s civil society strategy commits us to equip young people with “the ability to help the country tackle its most urgent challenges” and to ensure that they have the “opportunities to develop the skills, networks, and resilience that can improve their life chances” and “fulfil their potential”.

What better way to achieve this than through a programme of full-time social action? The creation of such a programme would maximise public investment in the National Citizen Service, the Government’s short-term social action programme for 16 and 17-year-olds. The NCS has laid a solid foundation on which to build a more intensive long-term offer. Nearly 100,000 young people engage with the NCS every year. Figures for 2016 show that more than 1,400 young people in Nottinghamshire participated in the programme. I helped to assess and judge some of their community work, working with Notts County FC Football in the Community, and I have met young people in Mansfield who have benefited from the programme. I know that many of them would be interested in full-time opportunities. A national full-time social action programme could ensure that the NCS is not just a one-off intervention, and that it instead creates a lifelong habit of social action.

Interestingly, the UK Government already support full-time social action for young people, but only for those who serve abroad in the International Citizen Service. The Department for International Development has allocated £8.5 million for the International Citizen Service next year, but no money is allocated to those choosing to serve their communities through social action here in the UK. If we could replicate that support so that young people could equally help and volunteer in our public services and good causes here in the UK, that could benefit those young people and their local communities.

If the Government need any further reason to act, an independent report by Pro Bono Economics found that encouraging 10,000 young people to volunteer full-time for a year could earn the UK economy between £28 million
to £119 million. A relatively modest investment in a Government-backed programme would pay off quickly, but I hope that colleagues agree that the benefits are far more than simply economic.

Offering, through independent volunteering and education, opportunities for young people to equip themselves with the skills they need to get on in life, and to be responsible for their own progress and their own decisions, is in my view an intrinsically conservative thing to do.

I encourage the Government to consider a pilot scheme, perhaps in a deprived area such as Mansfield—it might be the ideal place to do that—to see what impact full-time social action has on young people’s employability.

I hope that, in her reply, the Minister can provide an update on what the Government are doing to support full-time social action since the publication of their response to the full-time social action review for young people last July.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing the debate. He is a great advocate in this House for the interests of young people. His dedication and enthusiasm in promoting the work of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs speaks volumes.

I, too, am on the record speaking of volunteers as my favourite people. Volunteers’ passion and commitment shine through and raise some interesting thoughts cross-Government.

Let me deal with the intervention by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham)—although he is in discussion at the moment—about youth crime. That is a complex issue, which is often tied to local factors. I have just met the Prime Minister and other Ministers following our summit on youth violence. We are absolutely committed to working on that through a multi-agency public health approach.

I agree with the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) about the value of social action and engagement in and through our schools.

It is worth taking a few moments, given that we have the Chamber to focus on the subject, to look at the broader picture of youth social action and why it is such an important part of our efforts to improve young people’s life chances. In this country, we have a proud record of helping others. It is the cement that binds our communities together. Almost a quarter of the population formally volunteer at least once a month and many more do so informally. As we have heard, social action is about people coming together to help improve the lives of others and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It involves people giving their time in a range of ways—from volunteering and community-owned services to community organising or simple neighbourly acts.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Does the Minister agree that many of those projects help young people to find their way forward in life? Often, young people have not quite made up their mind about what they want to do in life. There is therefore value from that point of view. Equally, we must remember that not everybody is academically-minded. People might have good skills but not necessarily be academically good. I sometimes think that we lose track of that when we go on about further education and university education. Volunteering is important and a key to some of the problems that we have with young people on some housing estates, particularly where there are acts of violence, burglaries and so on. The Government could focus on that much more.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I responded earlier about the Government’s focus on the taskforce on serious violence. I also absolutely agree with the earlier point about intergenerational understanding. Volunteering can support our young people, from giving them more opportunities to learn soft skills to gaining that intergenerational understanding, perhaps through soft mentoring. That should be encouraged in all our communities and I am sure that much goes on in our constituencies that we are not aware of, even as MPs. It is vital that we continue to support such activity.

A good example is the dementia friends programme run by the Alzheimer’s Society. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ministerial team recently had a refresher about how to support people living with dementia and turn understanding into action. That programme has been very successful, and many people have taken part in it. There are 2.5 million dementia friends working to create an environment in our communities in which people with dementia are able to live well and be cared for.

If we are to renew and refresh the spirit that keeps our communities vibrant, we must keep young people in a central role. It is absolutely vital that we support the latest generation of active and involved citizens, so I am pleased that the Government are developing a new youth charter and are doing broader work to support that activity. Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust recently recruited 15 young people to spend time with older people in their own homes, to help combat loneliness. In time, that project will grow to 200 young people. That is just one of the projects supported by the Pears Foundation and the #iwill Fund, which is backed by the Government and the National Lottery Community Fund. As we have heard, social action will help open doors for young people. Young participants will develop essential skills and the tools for work and life that we have been talking about. Such programmes will build their resilience, enhance their wellbeing and, more importantly, help them give back to their community.

In 2017, the National Youth Social Action Survey by Ipsos MORI found that young people who take part in social action have higher life satisfaction, improved job prospects and stronger personal networks. However, it is not the hours that young people spend doing social action that is crucially important to those individuals and our communities, but the quality of the social action and experience. For example, it matters that the social action is part of the community, is focused on a community problem and is shaped and owned by the young people taking part. We heard earlier about the soft skills learned through the experience of mentoring.

The full-time social action review, chaired by Steve Holliday, was an important and extensive piece of work. In total, 180 individuals and organisations were consulted,
and 48 pieces of evidence were submitted by charities, businesses, young people and youth sector stakeholders. Roundtables conversations were held for providers, economists and employment and regulation specialists. Vitally, 77 young people also took part in the focus groups. Videos promoting the review reached more than 84,000 young people.

Young people painted a mixed picture of full-time social action opportunities. They found that some experience helped them through a difficult point in their lives and furnished them with new skills for their future. However, some highlighted that barriers prevented them from taking part in full-time opportunities. Important issues were raised, such as the availability of adequate financial support to cover living costs, and the negative implications for social housing, study and wider caring commitments.

One person said:

“on balance, it would be a struggle to say it was worth it, by virtue of the short and long-term personal and financial repercussions...I do not regret the time I spent volunteering, but would personally not recommend anyone take a voluntary position unless they have significant financial backing.”

The review also states:

“The evidence demonstrating the impact of full-time social action in contrast with part time social action is currently very limited. Many organisations argue that quality of social action is more important than quantity”.

That last point is very important.

We are aware of the value that full-time volunteering can bring to those who participate. However, devoting limited resources to the expansion and further evaluation of an approach that the extensive review has told us has little additional benefit to other approaches is not the sensible way forward, especially as many of the barriers to full-time volunteering arise out of personal life experiences. The Government, rightly, welcomed the report that acknowledged those issues and, importantly, set out a series of steps to make sure that full-time social action opportunities are more accessible. In our response, we welcomed a number of the recommendations, including the excellent work led by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations to create good practice guidelines for organisations that provide full-time social action opportunities. Importantly, one recommendation in the panel’s report mentioned a proposal for a Government-backed full-time social action pilot, as has been mentioned. That is a well-intentioned proposal, but given the lack of clear evidence and the feedback currently from young people, we do not think there is sufficient evidence for a separate full-time social action fund.

As the House is aware, we back a number of high-quality programmes for our young people, and last year we published the civil society strategy. It sets out an important vision for the next 10 years and shows that there is a vital role that young people can play in tackling challenges and creating a better future in their community through this strategy. Our national flagship policy is the National Citizen Service, which is a programme open to all young people aged 15-17. It is designed to deliver a concentrated programme of positive activities and personal development.

Crucially, it includes the opportunity for social action for our young people. I am pleased to say that nearly 500,000 young people, from all social backgrounds, have so far taken part in NCS. Together, they have given more than 12.5 million hours of volunteer time. We also know that NCS graduates give back an additional 6.3 hours of volunteering per month compared with their peers who have not taken part in NCS.

It is also important that the Government listen to the views of young people. We know that young people care deeply about the environment, so as part of the 2019 Year of Green Action NCS has been asked to, and will, directly engage young people in many environmental projects, including Clean Air Day. NCS is especially good at involving a higher proportion of young people with special educational needs. For example, in 2018, 5% of NCS participants had special educational needs; the figure for the comparable population was 2%.

As we heard earlier, we are also supporting young people to participate in social action by backing the #iwill campaign, which is run by Step Up To Serve. The campaign involves crucial work with businesses, as well as with philanthropists, the voluntary sector and local institutions, to make social action part of life for our 10-year-olds up to 20-year-olds. In support of that work, and in partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund, we are working with other funders to create new opportunities for young people to participate in social action. The £40 million #iwill Fund has to date partnered with 20 match funders, and it is estimated that 650,000 new opportunities will come forward for young people.

As I said earlier, social action is not just important for young people; we have heard about the importance of the civil society strategy, in which the Government have set out the importance of mobilising the time and talents of people of all ages. The initiatives are wide and reflect the needs of communities. For example, we are working to train 3,500 more people in community organising via our place-based social action programme. We are also working with the National Lottery Community Fund to help local areas to create a shared vision to address local priorities and to shape volunteering, co-designed services and social action.

Let me pick up on my hon. Friend’s point about using dormant assets. The Department is absolutely doing that and is shaping the next stage of our strategy in respect of interventions for young people through the use of such assets. It is absolutely right that we do that.

In conclusion, we are aware of the huge benefits that social action can bring to young people. Although we are not looking to privilege a particular volunteering route, social action will be an essential part of our thinking as we examine ways in which we support our young people and their futures.
House of Commons

Thursday 9 May 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Village Halls

1. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to regenerate village halls in rural communities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Village halls are at the heart of rural communities, and we want to ensure that they remain so for many years to come. That is why, on 5 April this year, the Government launched a £3 million fund to improve them. Grants of up to £75,000, or 20% of the project costs, are available for the refurbishment and alteration of these essential community buildings.

Craig Tracey: Village halls are a vital asset in many rural parts of my constituency, offering a wide range of activities for groups of people of all ages. I know that from personal experience, having served as chair of my local village hall in Shuttington for several years before my election. I welcome the fund, but how are village hall committees being encouraged to apply for it, given that they are often run by a large number of dedicated volunteers?

Dr Coffey: We have publicised the grant scheme on social media and fundraising community websites, and there have been more than 70 expressions of interest. The National Association of Local Councils has been informed, and I am sure that it will use its networks to advertise the scheme. I should point out that the deadline for applications is March 2020. The funds may already have been allocated by then, so we want to encourage as many village halls as possible to get on with their project proposals.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Bassetlaw will be happy to pioneer the green energy policy in village halls, along with the Secretary of State and the Government. We offer all our village halls to the Government, so that, with Government funds, they can work together to become carbon-neutral, and villages can see the benefits—

Mr Speaker: This is very interesting, but what is the question?

John Mann: The question, Mr Speaker, is this: does the Minister agree that such a partnership would be in the national interest?

Dr Coffey: The Government have already done that extensively in village halls, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth will be delighted to take an interest in any proposals that the hon. Gentleman puts to her.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Although small, the village of Rushton in my constituency has a church, a pub, a village hall and a village newsletter. Village halls are extremely important. Will the Minister take this opportunity to praise all the volunteers who seek no reward, save to serve their local communities?

Dr Coffey: I certainly will. I am sure that in some of the villages in Buckingham tonight, the villagers will be gathering in their rural communities to watch Arsenal—hopefully—beat Valencia, just as they will have watched Spurs win last night and the mighty Liverpool win on Tuesday. Village halls are places where communities come together for moments of joy, but also for other important purposes such as community activities, and our villages would be poorer without them.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I welcome the fund, but may I ask the Minister to look again at the eligibility criterion that forbids parish councils from bidding for it? In villages such as Rainford, Billinge and Seneley Green in my constituency, halls run by parish councils are real community hubs, and they would be good umbrella bodies to bid for the money on behalf of their communities.

Dr Coffey: I will certainly look at that again. I understand that village halls are usually run by separate entities, so I am not sure why there is a barrier to grant applications in the villages that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Hundreds of farmers are being treated for mental health issues. What plans have been made to ensure that village halls have a signpost to mental health help for rural communities?

Dr Coffey: Village halls are used for a variety of purposes, including the provision of health services, which are also available in the voluntary sector. I commend the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion on how we can continue to use village halls to support farmers locally.

Farm Workforce

2. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that farmers have access to the workforce that they need during the harvest.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): DEFRA is working closely with the Home Office on the future immigration framework as part of the longer-term strategy for labour in the food chain. The seasonal workers pilot is now open, and the first workers have arrived on UK farms.
Antoinette Sandbach: Eddisbury is the home of high-quality dairy farming and produces much of the country’s milk. However, dairy farmers in Cheshire are having huge problems with staff recruitment. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that the £30,000 annual earnings threshold for migrant workers post Brexit will not apply to farm workers?

Mr Goodwill: As I have said, DEFRA is working closely with the Home Office on this issue. The Government are committed to ensuring that a wide range of stakeholders have an opportunity to contribute their views and shape the development of the future immigration policy. That is why the Government have embarked on an extensive programme of targeted engagement with businesses and other stakeholders across the UK.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): In evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee, Archie Gibson of Agrico UK said that if Scottish farmers cannot get the seasonal workers they need to replace EU workers no longer able to come here, two fifths of farmers will cease the enterprise that needs that workforce; furthermore, three fifths will have to downsize. We all here, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) pointed out, have to make the not unfounded assumption that the same is true for the rest of the UK’s farmers and growers. Therefore, will the Secretary of State make urgent representations to his Cabinet colleagues that our farmers need migrant workers? They need a ready supply—not a short-term pilot, but certainty of policy that will not leave crops rotting in the ground again.

Mr Goodwill: May I correct the hon. Gentleman? He says EU workers will not be able to come here; under whichever scenario we leave the EU, that will not be the case. Those who are already here will be able to stay. During the implementation period, people will be able to live, work and study as now, and there is a registration scheme. In a no-deal scenario, European economic area citizens will be able to live and work here without a visa for three months and then continue to stay by applying for European temporary leave to remain, which gives them 36 additional months.

Leaving the EU: Farming Policy

3. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What plans he has for farming policy after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Agriculture Bill lays the foundations for farming policy in England as we leave the EU. This new policy will pay farmers for public goods, rewarding farmers for delivering environmental and animal welfare benefits. The protection of our countryside will allow us to leave the environment in a better state than when we found it while we support farmers to produce high-quality food in a sustainable way.

Rebecca Pow: I thank the Minister for that answer, but within that does he see soil health as a public good on its own terms or merely as a proxy or gateway for other benefits such as biodiversity, flood management—so important on the Somerset levels—and food productivity?

Mr Goodwill: Having studied soil science at university, I understand that soil is one of our greatest assets, and indeed the numerous environmental benefits and services that can be derived from activities that enhance soil health will be eligible for public money.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am glad that the Minister has had a change of heart on that because he argued against my amendment on soil during the Bill Committee, but now he is on the Front Bench. What are we doing to try to meet net zero emissions from farming either through the Agriculture Bill or other mechanisms? The Committee on Climate Change again endorsed that this week. What are the Government doing and when is the target going to be reached?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady makes a good point and, indeed, emissions from agriculture have fallen by about 16% since 1990. However, progress has stalled in recent years, with little change since 2009, and I know from the work we did together on the Environmental Audit Committee that we need to make further progress on that, particularly by looking at methane, which has a briefer half-life than other greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and so needs to be dealt with in a slightly different way.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): As we know, the potential of leaving the EU is creating some uncertainty so can the Minister reassure Cheshire farmers and the National Farmers Union that the current funding schemes that their members are working with will not be phased out until replacements are available to ensure that there will not be any loss of funding during any period of transition?

Mr Goodwill: We have made the decision clear with regard to the 2019 and 2020 schemes, and I remind farmers that the deadline for applications this year is 15 May as usual. I hope that they will get their applications in; sadly, in most years, we get a lot of applications on schedule?

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): NFU Scotland and other farming organisations north of the border are increasingly concerned at the lack of agreement between the UK Government and the Scottish Government to allow a Scottish schedule into the Agriculture Bill. Will the Minister meet me and a cross-party delegation, including the NFU and crofters organisations, to hear from them what the industry would want in that schedule?

Mr Goodwill: I would certainly be happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman. I was in Aberdeenshire recently and met representatives of the Scottish farming unions, and last week I met Roseanna Cunningham from the Scottish Administration and discussed a number of issues.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Where is the Agriculture Bill? It left Committee months and months ago, and given that we are spending an infinite amount of time on statutory instruments updating what the EU Commission is now doing, can we be assured that we will not have to completely rewrite the Bill—although
that could be useful in this time of climate change? We just need the Bill back so that farmers can have some certainty.

Mr Goodwill: I am as keen as the hon. Gentleman is to make progress. Perhaps the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), will be able to help, because as soon as we can clear the logjam and get Brexit out of the way, we will be able to get on with it. She is part of the team that is negotiating an accommodation between the two main parties, so perhaps she can help us to make some progress on Brexit so that we can get on with the Agriculture and Fisheries Bills.

Mr Speaker: I must say to the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) that I have received two approaches about him this week. First, I received a letter earlier this week in my office telling me what I already knew—namely, that he was a splendid fellow—and then I was at a book launch last night, when somebody beetled up to me to tell me that she was a constituent of his and that he was a splendid fellow. I do not know whether this is an orchestrated campaign, but I require no persuasion on this matter.

Environmental Education

4. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote awareness of the environment and food production among young people. [910779]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Young people are at the heart of this year’s Year of Green Action. We are working with the Department for Education on the £10 million flagship programme, which supports children from disadvantaged backgrounds to give them better access to the natural environment. We work closely with the DFE to promote awareness of pathways into food and farming careers.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. One of my constituents, Tom Martin, has set up a fantastic initiative called FaceTime a Farmer, which enables pupils to engage with agricultural and rural issues in the classroom via a video link with farmers out in their fields. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Tom on spearheading this brilliant initiative, and would he be interested in a meeting to learn more about it?

Mr Goodwill: I would certainly like to thank Mr Martin and farmers like him for all the hard work they put into such initiatives. FaceTime a Farmer is an exciting initiative to help children to engage with farming and get a better understanding of where their food comes from, and I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and Mr Martin.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister pass on my congratulations to the Secretary of State on his decision to meet young people to talk about climate change? Unfortunately, the meeting this week had to be postponed for fully understandable reasons. Lola Chirico and 14 others were disappointed not to be able to meet the Secretary of State, because they want to talk about climate change with him. Lola Chirico is my granddaughter.

Mr Speaker: Ah! What a heartwarming tale!

Mr Goodwill: The Secretary of State is sitting here, so I do not need to pass that on. It is certainly important that young people are leading the way, and I think that many of us are perhaps slightly embarrassed that we have been so slow off the mark. Going back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) said, it is important that young people should be aware of how their food is produced and where it comes from and of the seasonality in this country so that they can understand when different foods are in season. If they buy foods that are in season, they will be able to reduce the carbon footprint of the food they purchase.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): With an increase in the urbanised society and media, I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that the education of our young across all parts of our communities is very important. Against that backdrop, will he welcome and add whatever support he can give to Open Farm Sunday, which is a golden opportunity for young people to see agriculture in tooth and claw?

Mr Goodwill: Having attended a number of Open Farm Sunday events in my constituency, I can commend it and I hope that more farmers will contribute to it so that more young people, particularly those from urban areas who do not understand agriculture and the hard work that goes into producing the food they consume, can attend those events. Perhaps not so much food would be wasted if people understood how much hard work was put into producing it.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Palm oil is an essential component of much of our food production, but unsustainable palm oil production across south-east Asia is wrecking a lot of natural forests. Will the Government join me in congratulating Chester Zoo on its sustainable palm oil campaign? What support can they give to that campaign?

Mr Goodwill: The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who is sitting next to me, is visiting that tomorrow, and we are all certainly aware of the environmental impact of palm oil. There is a perfectly good alternative, in the form of British rapeseed oil, which is produced in places such as Yorkshire and East Anglia.

Leaving the EU: Welsh Seafood

5. Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the Welsh seafood industry. [910780]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Ministers from across the four Administrations in the United Kingdom meet monthly at the inter-ministerial group for environment, food and rural affairs to discuss the negotiations with the EU.
The most recent meeting was on 29 April in Cardiff, and we will continue to work together to secure the long-term profitability of the Welsh fishing industry as we leave the EU.

Liz Saville Roberts: Fishing vessels at Porth Dinllaen and coastal communities around Wales land a whelk catch worth £6.2 million every year. Have the Welsh Government made any specific representations to Ministers to ensure that our fishermen do not face tariffs of 20% on exports to the crucial South Korean market after Brexit? Will he meet with me to discuss the importance of the seafood industry to Wales’s coastal economy?

Michael Gove: I completely appreciate the vital importance of ensuring that the trade in whelks between Wales and South Korea is protected. One of the reasons why the Department for International Trade has prioritised making sure that we have continuity trade arrangements with South Korea is to ensure that Korean consumers can continue to enjoy this great Welsh product. The one threat to that trade would be the election of a Labour Government at the next general election because, as we all know, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) could not run a whelk stall.

Mr Speaker: I think that one probably requires a little bit of work and finesse, but it is only a matter of time. That was a first draft.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): Welsh fishermen will be particularly interested in the application of the Hague preference since the ability to invoke it and, more importantly, counter-involve it against the Irish Republic is critical to our interests. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the withdrawal agreement will protect our ability to invoke the Hague preference, because he will understand that it is not part of the common fisheries policy but a political convention that needs to be invoked each year?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We will be able to continue to invoke the Hague preference in certain circumstances, and it is vital that we do so in defence of our interests.

Waste Incineration

6. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of a moratorium on new waste incineration plants to promote recycling. [910782]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is important to do whatever we can to recycle as much waste as possible, but waste incineration plants continue to play an important role in generating energy instead of diverting waste to landfill. However, our assessment is that additional residual waste energy capacity above that already planned to 2020 should not be needed if we achieve our recycling targets.

John Grogan: Further to that welcome reply, has the Minister seen the recent report from independent consultants Eunomia? It indicates that we will indeed have enough waste incineration capacity to deal with our country’s residual waste and that if we build more incinerators, the danger is that waste will be diverted from recycling.

Dr Coffey: I have not seen that report, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that we discussed this matter in his recent Westminster Hall debate. It is important to say that we are still making progress to ensure that we achieve our recycling targets, but incineration by default is certainly not the answer that we want to promote.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As the fast fashion trend continues to increase, will the Minister outline both the short-term and long-term plans to tackle the hundreds of thousands of tonnes of clothing that is incinerated every year?

Dr Coffey: There is definitely a market for trying to extract fibres from textiles. We are considering extending the extended producer responsibility to textiles, but the policy is still under consideration.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The Minister will know that Wales recycles more than any other part of the UK, with ambitious targets and a new £6 million fund to help businesses become plastic free. Should the Government not learn from Wales, given that they are flatlining on their own targets?

Dr Coffey: We do, and I commend the Welsh Government on that policy deployment. We are consulting on certain measures to try to increase recycling, and the consultation closes next week.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): As the Minister knows, the level of recycling in England rose from around 7% in 1997 to around 44% in 2011, but it has flatlined since then. Much of the incentive for the increase in recycling during those years came from avoiding the landfill tax, and Government capital grants for increasing recycling were balanced by landfill tax receipts. However, now that most household waste is incinerated, those incentives no longer apply. The “Our waste, our resources” strategy states:

“Should wider policies not deliver the Government’s waste ambitions in the long-term, we will consider the introduction of a tax on the incineration”.

Will the Minister tell us how many more years of flatlining it will take before she is willing to make that consideration?

Dr Coffey: The landfill tax has been important in reducing landfill. As I have just said, we are consulting on measures that build on the resources and waste strategy that we published a few months ago. We have been quite clear that we must ensure that we increase recycling, and we will take further measures if incineration is still proving part of the problem.

Farm Subsidy Payments

7. Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to speed up subsidy payments to farmers. [910783]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): We have delivered significant improvements to the basic payments scheme in England this year, with 99.7% of the 2018 payments now complete.
I am, however, acutely aware that we have much more to do to deliver the stewardship schemes to the same high standards.

Susan Elan Jones: My constituency borders rural communities in Cheshire and Shropshire, and I know there is immense concern in the farming community on this point. In view of the pretty damning report in 2017 from the Public Accounts Committee and the fact that a third of all UK farmers are now aged 65 or over, will the Government act and do something urgently?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady makes a valid point and I do not underestimate the importance of getting this right. That is one of the reasons why we took responsibility for these stewardship schemes away from Natural England and gave it to the Rural Payments Agency, which is performing much better. But we do need to do better, not least because, if we want to incentivise more farmers to participate in these schemes, we need to make sure that we keep our part of the bargain and give them the money they deserve.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Not only is it a problem with stewardship schemes that existing farmers are not getting paid, but many farmers are deciding not to go into those stewardship schemes. The whole of our new agricultural policy will be going in that direction, so it is vital that the Minister now sorts it out. You have had some time—not the Minister personally—and it is time the Department sorted it out.

Mr Goodwill: Point taken. On my own farm I have just planted wild bird seed and a big area of nectar plants, so I will report to the House when my payments come through, although I have insisted to officials that I do not want them to accelerate my payments. I will be one of the last to get paid, so I will keep a careful eye on this matter.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What regime is planned for soil quality? When are we likely to get it? It is so important for carbon retention.

Mr Goodwill: As I mentioned, many of the public goods we are to deliver will result in better soil quality. We also need to have a debate on the role of livestock on mixed farms because many of the farms I have visited recently on which soil quality is improving are farms that use manures and slurry to improve the soil—we no longer have that in many of the big intensive agricultural areas.

Climate Change

8. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling climate change.

Mr Goodwill: The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Tackling climate change is a cross-Government priority and it is one of a range of issues that I discuss with all Cabinet colleagues. My Department works closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to reduce emissions in the natural resources sector, as set out in the clean growth strategy.

Neil Gray: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Of course Scotland leads the way not only on renewable energy production but on the commercialisation of new renewable energy technology. Can he explain how this area is a priority for his Government when they are cutting the subsidies to renewable energy generators? When will he review that process so that Scotland can continue to generate new renewable electricity and export it to the rest of the UK?

Michael Gove: I am happy to congratulate the many entrepreneurs, innovators and others who have been responsible for powering ahead with the growth of the renewables sector not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom. One of the reasons why subsidies for solar, for example, have been cut is because the price has come down—the subsidies were necessary to kick-start investment. It is a fact that 99% of solar power generated in this country has been generated since 2010—since the Conservatives have been in Downing Street.

Martyn Day: I understand that the Secretary of State sat in close attention when Greta Thunberg visited recently. Following her visit, will he tell us whether he agrees with the Scottish Government that there is a climate change emergency? If so, what does he intend to do to cut emissions from aviation?

Michael Gove: There absolutely is a climate change emergency and a need to act, and Greta Thunberg’s testimony was incredibly powerful. When it comes to aviation, we need to work with the sector to ensure that we balance the need to promote growth and, indeed, the need to promote links across the United Kingdom while moving towards meeting our net zero goal.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The Scottish Affairs Committee, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and, most recently, the Committee on Climate Change all agree with the Carbon Capture and Storage Association that carbon capture, usage and Storage—CCUS—is essential for achieving a net zero emissions target by 2050. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that, in order to tackle climate change properly, we must develop a CCUS cluster such as the Acorn project, which is centred on St Fergus in my constituency? Does he also agree that this cluster approach is far more effective technically and financially than previously proposed carbon capture and storage programmes?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and we are absolutely committed to supporting the work in St Fergus. Technological breakthroughs in institutions such as Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen are also precisely the sorts of work that we should be getting behind.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Today the Environment Agency announced that it is preparing for a catastrophic 4° rise in global temperatures and huge sea level rises. The EA says it
needs £1 billion a year for coastal defences, but the Government have allocated only £2.6 billion over six years—less than half of what the EA says is needed. When should we expect the necessary increase in funding and a plan to protect our vulnerable coastal communities?

**Michael Gove:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. First, I record my thanks to Emma Howard Boyd, the chair and chief executive of the Environment Agency, for the leadership that they have shown on this issue. Under this Government, record amounts have been spent on flood defences and record efforts have been made to combat climate change. However, in both cases, more needs to be done. The national policy statement will be forthcoming shortly.

**Moorland Wildfires**

9. **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the risk of wildfire destroying moorland.

10. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What plans his Department has to develop and resource a recovery plan for seabirds.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley):** It is good to see the hon. Lady back in her place for the first DEFRA questions since returning from maternity leave and the safe arrival of baby James. Congratulations.

Protecting our moorland from wildfires is essential. The risk of severe damage from wildfire on wet, well-functioning blanket bog is relatively low. Natural England is working with landowners and land managers through its uplands programme to develop long-term management plans. We are also currently undertaking a wildfire review to ensure that our future land management policies minimise the risks of wildfire.

**Holly Lynch:** I am grateful to the Minister for that response and for his kind words.

In West Yorkshire alone, there have been three significant wildfires in the past 18 months. The Minister will be aware that, if we manage our moorland and peat bogs responsibly, they will lock in water, which protects us from flooding; they will lock in carbon; and, kept wet, they will also protect us from wildfires. What more can we do to manage those moorlands and peat bogs responsibly?

**David Rutley:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right that healthy wet peatlands help carbon storage and minimise and reduce fire risk. That is why peatland restoration is an urgent priority. DEFRA is currently funding four large-scale peatland restoration projects across England, involving £10 million fun. In the north of England uplands, the Welsh borders, Dartmoor and Exmoor and, of course, the south Pennines: vital work that we need to take forward.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Staffordshire moorlands have some magnificent heathland, but it has been affected by severe fires in the last year. Those are sometimes caused by disposable barbecues. Has the Minister looked at ways of ensuring the more responsible purchase and use of such barbecues?

**David Rutley:** We work closely with Natural England and the Home Office to see how we can tackle these issues. Operational plans are in place with fire services as well.

**Seabirds**

11. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Whether he plans to meet representatives of the Environment Agency to discuss the recent pay dispute at that agency.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** No.

**Daniel Zeichner:** That is very disappointing to hear. We have just heard praise for the Environment Agency, but its staff have seen a 20% cut in real terms over the past decade. The agency is suffering from recruitment and retention problems and, inevitably, low morale. Will the Minister think again and at least press the Environment Agency to reopen the discussions?

**Dr Coffey:** No, because it is an operational matter for the Environment Agency and it would not be appropriate for the Government to get involved in the human resources issues of an independent agency.
Major Infrastructure Projects

12. Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): What steps his Department takes to ensure that major infrastructure projects comply with all environmental licences, permissions and protections.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I know this is a topic close to your heart, Mr Speaker.

Large infrastructure projects may require an environmental impact assessment of the likely significant environmental effects. In the case of nationally significant infrastructure projects, the EIA forms part of the development consent order application. Requirements are routinely imposed to ensure that development is delivered sustainably. Projects such as High Speed 2 include environmental minimum requirements and associated controls linked to the EIA.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am glad that the Minister brought up HS2. Even before construction has been given the go-ahead, the HS2 enabling works have breached environmental undertakings and assurances. Given that the project will destroy 100 ancient woodlands, how can we ensure that what DEFRA is trying to achieve in preserving our environment is not going to be destroyed by the HS2 construction companies as they desperately scramble to cut corners and cut the costs of this highly expensive and useless project?

Dr Coffey: The environmental impact assessment is an important part of the planning process. The development of HS2 will require a number of protective provisions, consents and licences for work that affects protected sites and species and other aspects of the natural environment. The Environment Agency and Natural England will continue to work with HS2 Ltd to ensure that it complies with the conditions set out by the requirements. I recognise the issue relating to the ancient woodlands, but I am sure my right hon. Friend will join me in celebrating the fact that 7 million new trees will be planted, and planting has already started.

Topical Questions

T1. [910794] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): First, I thank colleagues from all parties for their support for the Government in giving the Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill its Second Reading. Thinking of our responsibility to the natural world, I extend my sympathy to the family of Guardsman Mathew Talbot. Mathew died working on an anti-poaching initiative in Africa just two days ago. He was a distinguished young 22-year-old solider who was fighting to preserve the natural world. Our sympathies go out to his family, friends and colleagues.

Nigel Huddleston: Vale of Evesham asparagus is the only asparagus with protected geographical indication status. As I am sure the Secretary of State is aware, we are currently in the middle of the British Asparagus Festival, which is held mainly in my constituency. Would he like to join me at that festival and to show his support for great British farmers who grow not only the best asparagus in the world but so much more fantastic, world-class British produce?

Michael Gove: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his drawing attention to the importance of asparagus growers in our broader agricultural export successes. It is not only grown in the Vale of Evesham, beautiful part of the country though it is; we also grow world-beating asparagus in Yorkshire. Overall, asparagus exports have secured £3.2 million for this country. Although I cannot join the festival, I would be delighted to share some asparagus with my hon. Friend at the first available opportunity.

Mr Speaker: We are now considerably better informed about the asparagus situation.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Last week, the House made history by declaring a climate and environmental emergency. The Labour motion that was passed gives the Government six months to table urgent proposals to restore our natural environment and tackle devastating climate change. That means that the deadline is 1 November. The clock has started to tick. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the Cabinet has met to discuss the urgent nature of the motion? When will he publish a timeline that clearly sets out how the UK can reach net zero emissions by at least 2050?

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Lady for underlining the cross-party, consensual approach that the House has taken to dealing with climate change and the broader environmental crisis that we face. The House will be updated not only on progress against the 25-year environment plan and not just in response to the recent report by the Committee on Climate Change on how to reach net zero by 2050, but on a broader suite of measures that every Government Department, from the Treasury to my own, is committed to ensuring that we deliver.

T2. [910796] Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps have been taken to establish a Great Britain-wide deposit return scheme for plastic bottles, which the industry wants, including Highland Spring in Blackford in my constituency?

Michael Gove: Having had the opportunity to visit Highland Spring, thanks to my hon. Friend, I endorse wholeheartedly the company’s leadership in providing high-quality products to so many people across the world. It also provides employment in his constituency. Highland Spring, like us, wants to ensure that we have a UK-wide scheme. Although I applaud the ambition of Roseanna Cunningham, the Scottish Government Environment Minister, in taking forward a DR scheme, it is absolutely vital that we make sure it works UK-wide. I hope and believe that the Scottish Government will now put the interests of the United Kingdom ahead of the ideology of separatism that sometimes creeps into some of the things they come up with.

T4. [910798] Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): One of the recommendations in the Committee on Climate Change’s report last week was a 20% reduction in meat consumption
by 2050 to meet that net zero goal. Can the Secretary of State set out how he plans to achieve that in a way that is fair and equitable? Red meat is obviously particularly important in the diets of children and women, and we do not want to use price as the mechanism.

Michael Gove: That was a typically balanced and thoughtful contribution from the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. One thing I would say is that sustainable farming, particularly mixed and livestock farming, is a critical part of ensuring that we have a healthy environment. I absolutely take on board her point. One thing we absolutely do not want to do is use a crude taxation intervention when it is much more sensible to work with farmers to raise the quality of livestock. There are things we can do on how livestock farmers operate that can contribute to reducing emissions, while at the same time maintaining high-quality red meat that is available to people at every price point.

T3. [910797] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May I invite you, Mr Speaker, your officials and all Members in the Chamber to join me, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Kew Gardens, the British Beekeepers Association and others as the all-party parliamentary group for bees and pollinators discusses how we can green the parliamentary estate and get a hive of bees on board as well? Does the DEFRA team agree that we would all get a tremendous buzz to see Parliament as a hive of activity for our pollinators?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I had better answer this with a coat of honey. It is important that this Parliament is open to nature. We agree that we would all get a tremendous buzz to see some bees on board as well? Does the DEFRA team agree that we would all get a tremendous buzz to see Parliament as a hive of activity for our pollinators?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I had better answer this with a coat of honey. It is important that this Parliament is open to nature. We have already seen great changes through the Administration Committee and what we are trying to do about elements of plastic. The Department already has a beehive on its roof and I am keen that we should continue to do whatever we can as leaders. I am sure that my hon. Friend will also be very aware of the national pollinator strategy and how important it is to the future of biodiversity and sustainable food production.

T5. [910799] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): At Treasury questions a few weeks ago, Ministers boasted about how much hauliers had saved through the freezing of the fuel duty escalator. When I challenged them on the environmental impact, they looked absolutely amazed, as though the thought had never crossed their minds. Should the Secretary of State be in a position of influence later this summer in a new Administration, will he be equally blinkered or will he be bold in tackling emissions from road transport?

Michael Gove: I am frankly amazed at the suggestion that any Minister should indulge in something as prideful as boastfulness. I suspect that my Treasury colleagues were pointing out to my hon. Friend what we said in the national policy statement. I think it is time that I visited Caithness. Perhaps, Mr Speaker, we could even have a polytunnel with the words uttered by you, Mr Speaker.

Michael Gove: Yes. I have had the privilege with my hon. Friend, who chairs the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, of visiting the Stewar peninsula in Somerset and seeing effective flood management that makes sure that we balance the need to protect nature with the need to preserve farmland. It is vital that we say more, and we will shortly in our national policy statement.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thinking of young people and food production, the primary school in the small village of Inver in my constituency has a polytunnel. I do not know whether the school grows asparagus, but it certainly grows very good carrots and other vegetables to make delicious soup for the pupils. The pupils also sell the vegetables to their parents to make money for the school. Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be very helpful if this idea were replicated in all schools across the UK? Perhaps, Mr Speaker, we could even have a polytunnel for hon. and right hon. Members to grow vegetables here on the estate.

Mr Speaker: That sounds very exciting, I must say—very entrepreneurial. I think it is time that I visited Caithness.

Michael Gove: All I can say is that I associate myself with the words uttered by you, Mr Speaker.
Mr Speaker: Well, this is a very welcome trend and should be encouraged to continue.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What discussions has my right hon. Friend been having with his Cabinet colleagues about cutting vehicle emissions—for instance, by improving the infrastructure of charging points in cities for electric and hybrid vehicles, which is absolutely critical to this aim?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I have been working with the Secretaries of State for Transport, for Business and for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that charging points are automatically included in new developments. But there is more that we must do to ensure that we have an infrastructure that allows us to move towards ultra low emissions vehicles as quickly as possible.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Contrary to what the Secretary of State said to me last week, the DEFRA main estimate says that the budget for peatland restoration is unchanged. I am not going to ask for an apology, but the Secretary of State knows that peat amounts to 10% of our carbon dioxide emissions, so when is he going to increase the measly £6 million budget?

Michael Gove: After a rebuke like that, I must do so as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: As much as I would like to continue indefinitely with these stimulating exchanges, I am afraid that we must move on.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Persecution of Christians: FCO Global Review


The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church warmly welcomed the decision by the Foreign Secretary to launch an independent review of his Department’s support for persecuted Christians, which is being chaired by the Bishop of Truro. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster made a joint submission to that review, setting out practical recommendations for how the Government could take action to protect Christians facing persecution and to promote freedom of religion more widely.

Diana Johnson: The Sri Lanka terrorist attacks brought home the FCO’s recent review findings that Christians are suffering persecution at near genocide levels. Alongside the growing Christianophobia, there are growing incidents of Islamophobia—such as at Christchurch—and anti-Semitism. What more can the Church of England do in co-ordinating international action across all faiths to combat hatred and violence against different faith communities by varied manifestations of the far right?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That interim report, which I recommend colleagues read, is quite a shocking revelation about how extensive the persecution of Christians and other minority religions around the world is. Just yesterday, the Archbishop of Canterbury invited the Foreign Secretary and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Lambeth Palace to discuss international religious freedom. The meeting included the Chief Rabbi and representatives of other faiths, because, as the Bishop of Rochester said in another place, it is almost impossible to predict when such terrorist attacks will occur and where.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has commendably authorised that independent report, but does my right hon. Friend agree that unless the Department for International Development also engages with the interim report and with the recommendations in the final report when it is produced, this country will never achieve what it could achieve in addressing this issue internationally?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I do agree. In fact, one of the key points of the Church of England’s submission is that there needs to be a joined-up approach more widely, right across Government, to the challenges of keeping freedom of religion and belief. That is why, with the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), I visited the former Minister who was jointly responsible at DFID and the Foreign Office to make sure that civil servants receive the right kind of training so that they really understand the threats that persecuted religious minorities face.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady will be very aware of the situation in Sudan at the moment, with such a complex outcome following the removal of Bashir. Will she urge the Archbishop of Canterbury to look at the possibility of an early visit there to make sure that Christians in Sudan are protected?

Dame Caroline Spelman: This allows me to share with the House a bit of good news on a rather serious and depressing subject, which is that the Archbishop of Canterbury, together with Pope Francis, brokered a meeting in Rome of the key players from the Sudanese conflict zone. Those talks made really significant progress in bringing about peace in countries where a war has claimed over 400,000 lives.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): International aid spending to recipient countries needs to be cut unless effective action is taken against attacks on Christians. Do the Church Commissioners agree?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church Commissioners are completely supportive of the statutory requirement in our law that 0.7% of our total income as a country should be spent on the world’s poorest people. In fact, DFID’s programmes direct themselves to the support of vulnerable minorities, but obviously the point of the report commissioned independently by the Foreign Secretary is to see how much more effective we can be at tackling the threats to religion and to people’s freedom of religion and belief.
**ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE**

*The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—*

**Voter Registration and Participation**

3. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What recent steps the commission has taken to increase voter (a) registration and (b) participation.  

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): While the commission’s remit does not include increasing participation in elections, it has an important duty to promote awareness of elections. The commission’s campaign for this year’s local elections saw over 570,000 applications, exceeding its target by 36%. Its campaign relating to the European parliamentary elections ended on Tuesday, and it saw a further 539,206 people apply to register. The commission also works to make improvements to the registration system itself. It is supporting the UK Government in their work to reform the canvass, and later this year it will publish the findings of feasibility studies examining how publicly held data could be used to improve the registration system.

Mr Sheerman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but does she agree that we have seen a serious decline in registration activity? The number of young people registering in time for the Euro elections has been pitiful. The fact of the matter is that we can go digital and do all that stuff, but it used to be about knocking on someone’s door and checking that they were on the register, and that is what really worked.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend will know that the commission wants as many people as possible to be registered to vote and able to participate in our democracy, but he is right to point out that young people are far less likely to register to vote than others. I will make sure that the commission is aware of his concerns and takes account of what he said as its research work continues in this area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the hon. Lady outline any discussions that have taken place regarding the ability to vote online and any security advice that has been sought with regard to that proposal?

Bridget Phillipson: I am not able to provide any recent updates, but I will ensure that the Electoral Commission contacts the hon. Gentleman to discuss his interest in that area.

**HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION**

*The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

**Staff Bullying and Harassment: Cox Recommendations**

4. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What the timeframe is for the implementation of the recommendations made by Dame Laura Cox in her report on the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Dame Laura made three fundamental recommendations. In response to the first, the Commission immediately terminated the Respect and Valuing Others policies. In response to the second, the Commission has been considering options for the investigation of non-recent cases of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct and expects to put a final proposal to the House before the summer recess. In response to the third, the Commission has agreed the establishment of a working group to consider how the process of complaints against MPs could be made fully independent, and we are in the process of agreeing the membership. Finally, the House service has appointed an independent director of cultural transformation, to translate Dame Laura’s wide recommendations into tangible, meaningful and lasting change.

Justin Madders: I am grateful for the update. It is very important that the House is seen to be acting swiftly on this. Let us not forget that it is more than seven months since the report came out, and it is frankly damning that we are still talking about things happening in the future. I urge the right hon. Gentleman to get on with this and get the justice that victims deserve.

Tom Brake: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I can reassure him that the House of Commons Commission is considering these important recommendations at every meeting, but we have not made the progress that we should have done. These are complex issues, and we hope that the working group will be established soon, to process how to deal with complaints against MPs independently of Members of Parliament.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that response, but I want to push him a bit further. Underlying attitudes—sometimes misogynistic or deeply sexist attitudes—are frequently behind sexual harassment. What plans does the Commission have to implement training or awareness raising that targets people who are unlikely to take it up if they are not required to do so?

Tom Brake: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. She may be aware that training is being made available to staff, and I understand that a trial will be made available for Members. Although the Commission and I are not in a position to require Members of Parliament to attend those sessions, I think it is essential that they do so.

**ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE**

*The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—*

**Voter Registration**

6. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): What recent assessment the commission has made of trends in the level of voter registration.
The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): These were appalling and despicable attacks, and those affected were in the prayers of millions right around the world on Easter Sunday. The attacks were clearly directed at the Christian community in Sri Lanka, attacks not just in their churches but in secular environments such as hotels where they were having Easter Sunday lunch. The Anglican Church in Sri Lanka is small but active, and it is working closely with the Anglican communion to build its capacity in the local community and to better protect itself.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that answer. It is indeed tragic that 257 Christians were killed in the attacks directed at them on Easter Day. Everybody is entitled to freedom of religion and belief. Does she agree that the message we should send out from this House is that no faith sanctions conflict against another?

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Electoral Law

8. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent representations she has received from the Electoral Commission on the effectiveness of electoral law.

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The commission believes that there is an urgent need for simplified and modernised electoral law. It has submitted evidence to the recently announced inquiry on electoral law by the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs. The commission is concerned that a piecemeal approach to electoral law reform will increase complexity and inconsistency. As part of these reforms, it wants legislation to improve the transparency of digital campaigns, to bring greater alignment between party and candidate regulatory frameworks, and to strengthen the impact of its sanctions.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Christian Community in Sri Lanka

7. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What support the Church of England is offering to the Christian community in Sri Lanka in response to the recent terrorist attacks in that country.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The commission carries out regular assessments of the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers, including how levels of voter registration vary by demographics such as age and ethnicity. The most recent published assessment found that, across Great Britain, 85% of eligible people were correctly registered, and 91% of entries on the register were accurate. The commission’s next study, on the December 2018 registers, is due to be published later this year.

Chris Ruane: Before every election, the Electoral Commission runs an advertising campaign to get people registered, and it judges the effectiveness by the number of downloads of registration forms. Those advertising campaigns have cost as much as £90 per download. Bite The Ballot, an organisation that recruits young people in schools, can have a 100% success rate in going into sixth forms and getting people on to the electoral register, and it can do that for 25p a time. Will my hon. Friend take that back to the Electoral Commission and ask it to have service level agreements with Bite The Ballot and other organisations that have an effective record on registration?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who I know has a keen interest in ensuring that people are registered to vote. The commission does not currently have service level agreements with other organisations. Instead, it collaborates through informal partnerships. The commission has a responsibility in law to raise awareness. There is plurality in the system, and that is its strength. However, I am sure that officials from the commission would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss what more can be done in this area.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has the commission made any assessment of the registration of EU citizens to vote in the European Union elections that are about to take place, and whether it would be appropriate for them to be able to take to polling stations on 23 May the form that they are required to have handed in by 7 May if they want to vote in those elections in the UK?

Bridget Phillipson: Following the 2014 European parliamentary elections, the commission did identify that the law needed to be simplified so that EU citizens from other member states might register to vote in the UK. However, following the EU referendum, the UK Government made it clear that the parliamentary elections to the European Parliament in 2019 would not take place, and therefore the commission did not continue to develop any further recommendations in this area.
Patricia Gibson: Does the hon. Lady share my concern that electoral law was broken in the EU referendum, the close result of which must now be questioned? Given that the Tories in Scotland were fined £400 by the Electoral Commission over a £100,000 dark money donation in the weeks before the 2016 Holyrood election, does she not agree that penalties for breaking electoral law must be urgently reviewed to ensure that they are fit for purpose and genuinely deter those minded to cheat?

Bridget Phillipson: The commission continues to urge each of the UK’s Governments to introduce legislation to strengthen its sanctioning powers. Its view is that the penalties need to be more proportionate to the income and expenditure of parties and campaigners.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Electoral law is far too important to play party politics with, in my view. I have the pleasure of serving on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I also served on the independent commission on referendums and their rules, run by the Constitution Unit. In its report, which was very comprehensive, we made a number of recommendations for changes to the law. May I ask the hon. Lady whether she has read that report, what she thinks of those recommendations and whether she, like me, would encourage the House to look at them urgently and pass them into law?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who raises an important point. Many of those recommendations are in alignment with the views of the Electoral Commission in urging change. She will know that the Government have indicated that they intend to bring forward changes to digital imprints for online campaigning, which will be an important step forward. I am sure that the commission would be grateful for any action she took to urge Ministers to bring forward that legislation as quickly as possible.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Cathedrals: Fire Safety

9. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to increase fire safety in cathedrals.

10. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking with the Government to ensure the fire safety of cathedrals and churches following the Notre Dame fire.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): Fire safety is a concern for all historic buildings, and they are particularly vulnerable during renovations or building works. Since the Notre Dame fire, the Cathedral and Church Buildings Division has worked with the Cathedral Architects Association to ensure that its records are up to date. It will continue to work closely on that issue, and a national conference on the matter is being considered.

Sir Desmond Swayne: George Osborne, the former Chancellor, found £40 million for the fabric of our cathedrals. Are we ensuring that that money is spent effectively, and that cathedrals work closely with local fire brigades?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England was deeply grateful to the former Chancellor for the £40 million of funding on the commemoration of the centenary of the first world war, and it resulted in important repair work to some of our most iconic buildings. For example, Lichfield cathedral was completely rewired, and it might otherwise have had to be closed because of the fire risk it represented.

Daniel Kawczynski: What steps are being taken to support the creation of 3D laser maps to record our notable historical buildings and provide an accurate record of their construction in the event of damage?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I wonder whether my hon. Friend has enjoyed watching the TV programme “Ancient Invisible Cities”, where scanners are used to reveal what lies behind ancient buildings such as pyramids. I must tell the House, however, that such methods are very, very expensive. Lincoln and St Albans cathedrals have done that, but there are many other ways to try to be sure of the data on our cathedrals. We have good archives, maps, photographs and accounts that often give an excellent record of what lies behind those magnificent stones.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman’s impassive countenance suggests that he is not at this time willing to vouchsafe to us his viewing preferences, but they have been hinted at by the right hon. Lady, and perhaps he will update us on the matter in due course.
Refugees in Sri Lanka

10.36 am

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister for Asia and the Pacific what representation his Department has made to the Government of Sri Lanka regarding the safety of 1,193 UNHCR refugees in Negombo, who went to Sri Lanka fleeing religious persecution in their countries, but who now fear for their safety following the terrible Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Following the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, there have been reports of isolated incidents of violence and of intimidation and discrimination against Muslims, refugees and asylum seekers. In Negombo, a suburb to the north of Colombo where the terrorist attacks took place, 985 refugees and asylum seekers were forcibly displaced from their ordinary places of residence, according to UN figures. Those refugees and asylum seekers, who are mostly of Pakistani origin, are being temporarily housed and protected to meet their immediate security and humanitarian needs.

Our high commission in Colombo, led by our outstanding high commissioner, James Dauris, is in contact with the Government and UN agencies to work towards a more sustainable solution, and the UK is monitoring that situation carefully, along with other partners. The UN is providing basic support for food, drinking water, and immediate medical assistance, and co-ordinating with civil society to provide additional relief items. The humanitarian situation at the police station in Negombo is a concern. The police have so far been very welcoming, but we understand that facilities there are insufficient.

Staff at our high commission are assisting in advocating and co-ordinating with the Sri Lankan Government more generally to identify safe and secure relocation options to ensure the protection of refugees and asylum seekers. We understand that processes are under way for some of the refugees to be resettled in third countries, and 412 refugees are currently in the midst of the UNHCR resettlement process.

Ministers and representatives of the UK Government have met Sri Lankan counterparts over the past three weeks to reinforce the importance of inclusivity and respect for human rights in response to the Easter Sunday attacks, and to underline the importance of Sri Lankans working together to avoid intercommunal tensions. As was brought up earlier, I think we can all be pleased, without being complacent, that over the past three weeks there has been a sense of unity within Sri Lanka as a whole.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime visited Sri Lanka on 2 and 3 May, and met the President, the Prime Minister, military and religious leaders and senior Government officials to highlight the importance of those points and to talk more generally about security resilience. Foreign and Commonwealth Minister Lord Ahmad and I have met the Sri Lankan high commissioner over the past fortnight to raise general concerns about refugees and minority rights in Sri Lanka.

I think all of us want to put on the record our grave concern about what happened. These were terrible events and our commiserations go to all those who remain affected and will be affected for some years to come.

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank the Minister for his response. I am sure we all send our heartfelt sympathy to the people of Sri Lanka and to all those mourning the loss of friends and family following the terrible Easter bombings.

Now that the spotlight of the media has turned, another tragedy is unfolding. There are 1,193 UNHCR refugees and asylum seekers, including 174 children, who have fled to three makeshift refugees camps in Negombo: the Pasyala Ahmadiyya mosque, the Negombo Ahmadiyya mosque and Negombo police station. Hostility towards Muslims following the attacks has led to growing violence, leading the refugees and asylum seekers to seek urgent safety. The conditions in the camps are worryingly inhumane. There is a severe lack of food and water, minimal toilet facilities, no medical facilities or basic sanitary facilities, no walls or beds, and not enough space to lie down. Over the bank holiday weekend, a child was born on the floor of one of the mosques. No doctor was present. Just this morning, latest updates indicated that more than one person had been taken to hospital due to illness.

The refugees and asylum seekers are largely from religious minorities who have suffered threats, attacks and persecution in their home countries. Many are Ahmadi Muslims who fled Pakistan, where their religious views may be punishable with death. Ahmadis identify as Muslims, but do not believe that Muhammad was the final prophet sent to guide mankind. This leads many of the refugees to be deemed to be “non-Muslim” in their home countries and to face persecution because of their beliefs. Now, in Sri Lanka, they face an imminent threat to their safety because they are considered to be Muslims.

The welfare of those in the makeshift camps is an immediate and serious concern, as is the possibility that these people will be forced to return to the places they fled from. Will the Minister use all his power to expedite the resettlement of the UNHCR refugees to safe third countries?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady. She is very persistent: this is the third day running that she has applied for an urgent question on this matter. Robert the Bruce would be proud: if at first you don’t succeed, try, try and try again.

The hon. Lady makes a very serious point, not least about the Ahmadi Muslims and the terrible paradox of their situation. They are regarded as outcasts in much of the Muslim world, but find themselves very much at the forefront of tensions. It is important that we do not overstate those tensions. As I said in my statement, the high commission on the ground and our UNHCR partners will do all we can, but it is remarkable that, given the history of intercommunal conflict in Sri Lanka, over the past three weeks there has been relatively little that has led to direct concern. However, she is also quite right to say that housing over 1,698 asylum seekers and refugees, according to UN figures, in three unsatisfactory makeshift camps—the Negombo police station and the two mosques—is clearly not sustainable.
Civil society contacts with whom we are working have reported other incidents of displacement and harassment of refugees in other parts of Colombo. It is important to recognise that we work together with many other high commissions and embassies in the area, including those of the US, Canada and a number of European countries who have a strong Sri Lankan diaspora whom they also wish to represent.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Can the Minister be more specific about the support the Government are giving to the Christian community in Sri Lanka following the Easter Sunday attacks?

Mark Field: I am always touched by the amount of work my hon. Friend does in this regard, not just in Sri Lanka, but across the world. We are of course concerned at reports of minorities being intimidated, and as she rightly says, the focus of the attacks on Easter Sunday was the Christian community in several locations across Sri Lanka. As she will know, we welcome the interim report by the Bishop of Truro on the persecution of Christians worldwide and we look forward to the final report, which is to be published in the summer.

Freedom of religion and belief is clearly a priority for the Foreign Office, and we and our high commission are working to ensure that the threads of the report that are particularly relevant to Sri Lanka will have an impact there. The Christian community in Sri Lanka is of long standing. Part is Roman Catholic and other bits are Anglican, from our colonial times, but we hope to work together with all Christian communities. This is part and parcel of a package that does not represent one religion above others, but ensures that in this melting pot within Sri Lanka, all religions and faiths can live side by side peaceably and in prosperity.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing it. She has been very persistent and is right to draw to the House's attention the plight of these refugees. I also thank the Minister for his response. I know he is very busy at the moment covering a large number of countries, but he brings a dedication to these issues, for which we are all grateful.

It is a matter great sadness that, despite the surge of national unity led by the Sri Lankan Government in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks, groups of mindless individuals have instead responded to the attacks with reprisals against the refugee communities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. They have responded to an act of sectarian hatred with further acts of sectarian hatred, which ultimately is what the terrorists want. The Sri Lankan Government have as much of a duty to crack down on this violence and to protect those refugee communities as they have to track down the organisers of the Easter Sunday bombings.

On behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, I wholeheartedly endorse the demands of Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and the other non-governmental organisations about what the Sri Lankan Government must do now to protect the refugees and make sure they are given adequate shelter and care while the situation is resolved. Will the Minister say today that the Government will not just endorse those demands but press counterparts in Sri Lanka to act on them? Will he also tell the House what support the Government are providing to Sri Lanka and whether, if any help is requested by the Sri Lankans, the British Government will respond?

As my hon. Friend said, the bitter irony is that many of these refugees in Sri Lanka are there having already fled religious persecution, and they have done so only to find themselves under attack again. The Government of Sri Lanka must urgently protect them.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words about my work. We have been on the opposite sides of this Chamber and other Chambers in this place several times in the past 48 hours, and I thank her for her constructive comments and for the work she does. She is absolutely right that we need to nip in the bud any return to sectarian hatred—something that is well known to anyone who has Sri Lanka close to their heart. The report makes very clear what is expected of the Sri Lankan Government, and we very much hope to work closely with them.

I have been to Sri Lanka as a Minister on three occasions in the past two years. It is a country that we take seriously, and I was very keen for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime to go out there in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, not least because we have some expertise to share in the important areas of institutionalised communication and preparedness. It is not for us to dictate that agenda, and obviously there is already important co-operation on the security and intelligence side, but we need to work closely on structures for the future to ensure that any sectarian hatred is nipped in the bud. When my right hon. Friend was in Sri Lanka, he met key national security figures, including the Defence Secretary, the State Minister of Defence and the army commander, as well as the Prime Minister. He also met the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Colombo.

We see our role as not to dictate but, hopefully, to provide useful advice. More generally, I hope that our experience as a result of what has happened in one part of the United Kingdom—Northern Ireland—can bear well on moving towards the reconciliation that all Sri Lankans deserve.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The Sri Lankan economy has recently benefited from increased tourism, particularly through cruise ship visits. Can the Minister assure me that he keeps the travel advice for British citizens on Sri Lanka under constant review? How can he ensure that our visitors to Sri Lanka continue to contribute to its economy?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for her constructive thoughts; she is absolutely right. To recap, on 25 April the FCO amended our travel advice: we now advise against all but essential travel to Sri Lanka, except for airport transit. Obviously we hope that our advice can be adjusted as soon as possible, when the security situation allows, but given the somewhat chaotic immediate aftermath of the attacks, we felt that it was
prudent. However, we understand that cruises and the fledgling but successful tourism industry in Sri Lanka will be very badly affected until we feel it is wise to update our travel advice.

The Foreign Secretary has made a statement to the House about the steps that the Government will take in the aftermath of the attacks. We very much hope to be able to take the earliest opportunity to ease the travel restrictions that we put in place three weeks ago, but obviously that will be led by the evidence and the facts on the ground.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker; I commend the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing it. I concur with her words and those of the shadow Minister and the Minister of State. We add to those messages of sympathy to the people of Sri Lanka and those who have been caught up in the horrendous terror attacks of Easter Sunday. It is clear that some have heeded the wise words about compassion and tolerance spoken by the Bishop of Colombo, Dhiroraj Canagasabey, in response to the attacks, but that others have not. I hope that those words will now be heeded.

This is a tragedy heaped on a tragedy. Many of those who were caught up in the horrific terror attacks were already refugees: Ahmadis and Christians from Pakistan, Shi'as from Afghanistan, and refugees from Iran who had fled from religious, ethnic and political persecution in their country. What further assistance can the Minister provide to the UNCHR in expediting asylum claims? What assistance can he offer to the Sri Lankan Government? If, for whatever reason, the Sri Lankan Government cannot offer asylum, what can the UK Government and their counterparts do to ensure that those poor people are offered safe refuge as soon as possible?

Mark Field: I know that the hon. Gentleman also applied for an urgent question on the matter; I suspect that he will table more next week on related matters.

Clearly we are working together. The pace at which we are working with UN agencies has increased in the aftermath of the attacks. As I mentioned, 412 individuals are already going through the process of resettlement to other parts of the world. We will continue to work closely with our partners in Sri Lanka; obviously there is a process that needs to be gone through, but we and they will try to expedite it to ensure that those refugees who are entitled to be moved on are moved on as quickly as possible.

I do not want to trivialise these matters, but we are obviously very pleased to see that the Sri Lankan cricket team has arrived in the UK for the world cup, which is imminent. That has some relevance at this point, because the first match of the one-day international series, which I believe will take place on Saturday week, will be against Scotland, of all places. I hope that, in true Scottish national style, the team will be given a very good welcome when they play in Broughty Ferry, or wherever it may be.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The terrorists declared war on civil society and against the peace of Easter Sunday. What support can the Government give the Sri Lankan authorities so that they can take speedy decisions and actions against reprisal attacks, which would only aid the terrorists in their objectives?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: sectarian hatred needs to be stamped out. That is clearly a matter for the Sri Lankan authorities, but we obviously stand ready to co-operate and assist in any way in which we may be asked to do so.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for asking the urgent question. The Minister said that 412 refugees were currently involved in the UNCHR resettlement process. May I press him on that? How many of those refugees does the UK intend to take, and what more can we do with the UNCHR to increase the number who are resettled and brought quickly to a safe haven?

Mark Field: I hope the hon. Lady will excuse me if I write to her with more specific details once I have them to hand.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend commend the local Muslim communities who have already given many refugees shelter in mosques? What more can this country do to help with those camps, which appear to be pretty unpalatable at present?

Mark Field: As my hon. Friend says, this can only be a short-term, interim measure, and we need something much more sustainable in future. The Government are spending £8.3 million of Conflict, Stability and Security Fund money on interfaith dialogue, reconciliation, police reform and training and de-mining in Sri Lanka, and a large sum on a wide range of other work, but I hope that elements of that can be used to deal with this urgent problem as well.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) has said, these refugee communities belong to religious minorities. Will the Minister make it clear to his Sri Lankan counterpart that there can be no question of their returning to Pakistan, Afghanistan or Iran, where they will inevitably face religious persecution?

Mark Field: I am happy to reassure the hon. Gentleman that when there is a well-founded case for refugee and asylum status, there should be no question of that. As my hon. Friend says, this can only be a short-term, interim measure, and we need something much more sustainable in future. The Government are spending £8.3 million of Conflict, Stability and Security Fund money on interfaith dialogue, reconciliation, police reform and training and de-mining in Sri Lanka, and a large sum on a wide range of other work, but I hope that elements of that can be used to deal with this urgent problem as well.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is easy to find compassion for people who were persecuted, left Pakistan, came to Sri Lanka and now face further persecution. Will the Minister confirm that he will stand up for the Ahmadis, who have been through so much, and is there anything practical that the international community can do to help the Sri Lankan authorities on the ground?

Mark Field: I hope that I have explained in some detail what we are doing on the ground, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we will do all that we can. The plight of the Ahmadis, which is a global plight, is close to our hearts. As my hon. Friend probably knows, Lord Ahmad himself is an Ahmadi Muslim.
Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the underlying issue is discrimination, and given that many of these poor refugees come from Pakistan, what representations will the Minister make to Imran Khan to make it clear that the blasphemy laws have no place in a modern world? They have caused not only this problem, but the case of Asia Bibi and, previously, the deaths of Salmaan Taseer and my friend Shahbaz Bhatti. It is about time that those laws were removed. Will the Minister do something about it?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that our own high commission, and our excellent high commissioner Tom Drew in Islamabad, have made our concerns very clear. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Asia Bibi case. I think that we were all greatly relieved at the outcome, but obviously the security of her family is still at the forefront of our minds. I do not want comment on further speculation, but the fact that this matter has been resolved is, I think, a tribute not just to the Pakistan authorities but, in particular, to the new Pakistani Government. However, I will endeavour to ensure that our high commission is made fully aware of the specific concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Change UK): Will the Minister undertake to raise with Sri Lanka the need to seek UNHCR assistance in managing the settlements so that they are not de facto detention camps? Also, further efforts need to be made for the security of these refugees, and Sri Lanka needs to deploy adequate numbers of law enforcement officers to ensure the protection and security of these vulnerable people.

Mark Field: The right hon. Lady makes the valid point that there is a risk, particularly if resettlement takes longer than we would all wish, that the settlements become de facto detention camps, which would be an unsatisfactory state of affairs, to put it mildly. As I have said, my counterpart from the Home Office was in Sri Lanka only last week and I know these sorts of issues were actively discussed. We will continue to make the case to which the right hon. Lady has referred.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister will be aware that the Ahmadi community in the UK is very active, including delivering condolence cards to Christian churches here following the attack in Sri Lanka and raising lots of money for charity in the UK and abroad. If that community chooses to fundraise for the refugees in Sri Lanka would the Government be able to match, or indeed better, the sum it raises?

Mark Field: I had better be a little careful because though I have these added responsibilities, I do not have Treasury responsibilities. However, the right hon. Gentleman is right that it would be useful if we were able to match that sum in the way that we have on other occasions; perhaps he could write to me with specific details of that and I will take it up with the Treasury and other Departments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities in Sri Lanka must be protected, and the Sri Lankan Government have given an undertaking to protect those who wish to worship their God. What has been done to assist those Ahmadis who have fled Pakistan in fear but are now afraid in Sri Lanka and seek somewhere else to relocate to to achieve that?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman always speaks for the dispossessed across the world and stands up for the freedom of religious belief. As I have said, we are working closely on the ground to do all we can with international partners, particularly the UN, to make life better for those impacted. I hope to report back either in FCO questions next week, or in due course, about progress in what is happening in Sri Lanka.
Business of the House

11.2 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

The business for next week will include:

Monday 13 May—Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill.

Tuesday 14 May—Opposition day (unallotted day). There will be a debate on prisons and probation followed by a debate entitled “Health and local public health cuts”. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

Wednesday 15 May—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Further Implementation etc.) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on serious violence.

Thursday 16 May—General debate on the definition of Islamophobia, followed by a general debate on the international day against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 17 May—The House will not be sitting.

Colleagues will also wish to know that subject to the progress of business the House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the close of business on Thursday 23 May and return on Tuesday 4 June.

The whole House will want to join me in congratulating the Duke and Duchess of Sussex on the birth of their new son, Archie Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor. We wish them a lifetime of happiness together.

I am delighted that the Bill to enable the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster has this week been introduced. In the wake of the tragic fire at Notre Dame, and with clear evidence here from recent fire incidents as well as falling masonry and many other safety issues, this Bill is vital to ensure we safeguard the seat of our democracy for future generations.

Finally, I am looking forward to taking part in one of the first voluntary independent complaints and grievance scheme training sessions for Members of Parliament later today, and I encourage all Members to show their commitment to our new behaviour code by taking part in one of the training sessions as soon as they can. As the six-month review of the ICGS is now well under way, the roll-out of the training for staff and Members will continue to demonstrate our commitment to treating everyone with dignity and respect.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business. I was going to ask her for the Whitsun recess dates, so I am pleased that she has announced them. May I ask for an update on when we are likely to get the list of ministerial responsibilities? I should also like to press her on the summer recess dates. The deputy Prime Minister said that he thought 2 July was the cut-off date for EU matters. It should not be beyond the House to provide those dates.

Members have often raised the issue of Ministers and other MPs visiting their constituencies without giving notice, and it has now happened to me. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) kindly informed me that she was coming to my constituency, in fact getting me an invitation to launch a train—apparently there will be tea and sandwiches in one of my favourite places in the constituency, the New Art Gallery—but I had not even been invited, even though those events were taking place in my constituency. This is the second time that that has happened. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), kindly apologised to me when I was given notice of an event only two hours before she visited. Those Members were actually being quite helpful; it is just that something is going wrong with the offices and the invites. Will the Leader of the House please raise these courtesies and protocols with her colleagues? Members should be told about these visits, and indeed invited to the events.

I am pleased that the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill has been introduced. As we have all said, the skills and jobs should benefit all our constituencies throughout the country, not just a few property companies based here in London. We need to ensure that our constituents are involved. I say gently to the Leader of the House that I am sure the Clerk of the House practically faints when she mentions Notre Dame, because he would never allow people to be in this building if it was not safe. We know that people are constantly firefighting here every day, and no one would be allowed in the building if it was as unsafe as that.

Will the Leader of the House update us on when the withdrawal agreement Bill will be introduced? There has been some debate in the media about that. I do not think it was Faisal Islam who tweeted about it this time, but there has been some suggestion that it could be next Thursday, and I know that a Backbench debate has been scheduled for that day. Are the Government going to bring back the withdrawal agreement Bill next week?

We need certainty on that matter, because the right hon. Lady will have seen the research from the Incorporated Society of Musicians which shows that the uncertainty over Brexit is continuing to cause real damage to the music industry, which is a very important part of our GDP. The ISM has concerns about future work, mobility, visas, transportation of instruments and equipment, and health and social security. The research showed that 63 respondents cited difficulty in securing future work in the EU27 and EEA countries as the biggest issue that they faced because of Brexit. More than one in 10 respondents reported that offers of work had been withdrawn or cancelled with Brexit being given as the reason. May we have more certainty for that sector?

Many Members are trying on the captain’s hat, even though there is no vacancy for the captain of the ship, but as they look through the periscope, they will see that 200,000 nurses have left the NHS since 2010. If there is not a crisis, why are the Government having to recruit tens of thousands of nurses from overseas? It is because nurses are being driven out of the overstretched NHS owing to the lack of Government funding. Why are we seeing the first sustained fall in GP numbers in the UK in 50 years? Why are they leaving the profession? We also know that 30,000 ambulance staff have quit their jobs. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Secretary of State for Health—when he takes off the captain’s hat—makes a statement on that crisis?
When the Home Secretary takes off the captain’s hat and looks through the periscope, he will see the crisis on our streets. The Prime Minister said yesterday that she had chaired a summit and a taskforce, and there will be a general debate on serious violence next week. I know that my hon. Friend, the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) wanted to raise this matter with the Leader of the House. Will she ensure that the Home Secretary comes to the House next week to report on the taskforce and to tell us exactly what is going to happen to stop people dying needlessly? Our police need their resources. Our criminal justice system also needs resources, and barristers are about to walk out on strike. It was no good the Leader of the House saying last week that it is up to the Justice Committee to respond when I raised the Criminal Bar Association’s strike. She cannot outsource responses to Select Committees; we need to know what the Government are doing.

The Leader of the House kindly said that she would get an answer to Opposition day motions within eight weeks, but exactly when will our climate emergency motion receive a response? The clue is in the word “emergency”. She will have seen the news about the effect of climate change on the unprecedented decline in biodiversity, and I will read out the whole thing so that people know what I mean. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services says that “1 million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction.”

We need a response, and I understand that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs did not say when he would respond to our Opposition day motion.

May we have a debate in Government time on their flagship digital identification system Verify, which is failing its users? Only 3.9 million people have signed up, and it will affect those applying for universal credit most of all. Some 25 million users are expected by 2020.

I am pleased that the Backbench Business Committee agreed to a debate today, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), in tribute to John Smith, the former leader of the Labour party, as we approach the 25th anniversary of his death on 12 May. He served as an MP for 24 years, and I am sure that hon. Members will do him justice. I remember the image of Smith and Brown striding into the Commons to take the Government apart with their brilliant arguments. At this time, we think of his widow Elizabeth and his brilliant daughters Sarah, Jane and Catherine. He would have been pleased that today is also Europe Day, which marks peace and prosperity within Europe.

The Opposition also wish Archie Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor and all the babies born this week peace and prosperity for their futures.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises several issues. The list of ministerial responsibilities will be updated in due course, and the summer recess is obviously subject to the progress, so I will announce it as soon as I can.

As for West Midlands Trains, I am glad that the hon. Lady accepts that my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) went out of her way to ensure that she was invited. It was a matter for West Midlands Trains and has nothing to do with any Government mission. As a matter of fact, when my hon. Friend raised the issue with West Midlands Trains, she was told that the hon. Lady had in fact been invited but had not checked her emails. I hope that that deals with that query. The hon. Lady should feel free to apologise to my hon. Friend if she wants to.

Turning to the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill, I am glad that the hon. Lady shares my delight at its introduction. I am particularly grateful to her for being one of the Bill’s sponsors. It is important that it is a parliamentary project, so I am delighted by the cross-party support for it.

The hon. Lady asked when the withdrawal agreement Bill will be introduced, but that is obviously subject to the talks with the Opposition. So I am sure that she will able to get an update from her own side. It is the Government’s intention to seek cross-party agreement to get a Bill that the whole House can support. It is absolutely essential that we leave the European Union, and it is utterly unacceptable that we have not done so three years after the referendum. I say to all hon. Members who are worried about the impact on businesses and on people going about their everyday lives that if they support the withdrawal agreement Bill, we can put such issues to rest and get on with the important matters that our constituents are concerned about.

The hon. Lady mentioned GPs, and I can tell her that under this Government the NHS is having its biggest-ever investment, with £33.9 billion in cash terms by 2023-24. There are over 4,500 more paramedics since this Government took office, and Health Education England recruited the highest number of GP trainees ever last year—nearly 3,500. We are committed to increasing access to general practice, which is vital to us all. The hon. Lady raises the issue of serious violence and the serious violence taskforce, and I hope that she noticed that, in response to the many requests from across the House, I announced that we will hold a debate in Government time on serious violence next week. It is my expectation that the Home Secretary will lead the debate—although, of course, that is not a matter for me to determine—and it is for Departments to decide who is the appropriate responder.

On Opposition day responses, I confirmed a couple of weeks ago that, in response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s recent report on resolutions of the House of Commons, I have shortened the deadline for the Government to respond to motions passed by the House, from 12 weeks to eight weeks, to ensure the House gets those responses faster, while still ensuring that there is time for full and proper consideration of resolutions.

Finally, the Government and all parties agree that climate change is one of the biggest challenges facing the world. To give the hon. Lady a few of the Government’s actions, we have planted 15 million trees since 2010; we are calling for an increase from 10% to 30% of the world’s oceans to be marine protected areas by 2030; we have reduced our greenhouse gas emissions by 25% since 2010; and we have launched a 25-year environment plan with a pledge to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste. Those are just a few examples of this Government’s excellent work, and we are determined to be world leading in our actions, not words, to tackle the global challenge of climate change.
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the Turkish incursion into the Cyprus exclusive economic zone? The incursion is unlawful and unacceptable, and it is shocking that a NATO ally is responsible. This House needs an opportunity to condemn those actions.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a serious issue that I am sure she will wish to raise at Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on Tuesday 14 May. I commend her for raising the importance of such an issue.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business. I wish her, most sincerely, all the best in her renewed leadership campaign. I do not know who has better odds—her of becoming Prime Minister or me of succeeding you in the Chair, Mr Speaker. I suspect it might be me, but it now looks like the Gloria Gaynor of 10 Downing Street might not survive much longer as the men in grey underpants set a timetable for her departure. So can we have a debate on cruelty in sport? There are now so many runners and riders that it will be like a dysfunctional grand national, with one Minister saying that few of them know how to ride.

The council elections went well, didn’t they? It is hard to think of an election in which both the Government and the main Opposition party got royally stuffed. We are all now looking forward to the European elections—the SNP certainly is—and we cannot wait to see the Tory manifesto. I bet they will be up all night writing that one. “Chapter one: we want to leave the EU, but the party won’t let us. Chapter two: please don’t vote for Farage! Chapter three: erm, that’s it.” I do not know whether the award for best comedy in a party political manifesto has yet been awarded, but it should definitely be delayed until we see that cracker.

We have not had an answer to the meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement, but I think that the House deserves one. The rumour is that the Government will bring it back next week, with Thursday being suggested. What are the Government’s plans for the meaningful vote? When, and in what form, will they bring it back? This purgatory cannot go on any longer. Nothing is being done. Important Bills need to be brought back to the House, and we need to get back to work. The House rose early on two days this week, and this place is quickly becoming an international laughing stock. All I can say is that, after 20 years of devolution, we are looking forward to completing the powers of our Parliament in Scotland, and it will be goodbye to this place.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his, as ever, rather witty, if a little misguided, contribution. The fundamental problem is that his party does not believe in abiding by the result of referendums, whereas the Conservative party does. We had a referendum in 2016, and we are determined to deliver on the result by leaving the EU; Scotland had a referendum in 2014 and, regardless of whether it has another one, the SNP will abide by it only if it gets the result it wants.

As a huge supporter of the United Kingdom, I also welcome the 20 years of devolution, which has been a huge success—except to the extent that the hon. Gentleman’s Government in Scotland have failed to take up many of the powers they have been offered under devolution. It is extraordinary that a party in Scotland that claims to be able to set up within 18 months a new independent country with its own currency, while staying in the EU, cannot even manage to accept powers to take on VAT, welfare or any of those modest little issues. It seems extraordinary to me that the hon. Gentleman is preaching to my party, which is determined to deliver on the democratic will of the people.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): T.S. Eliot said:

“Knowledge is invariably a matter of degree”.

That was brought home again this morning when the Environment Agency predicted that many coastal areas, including much of South Holland and The Deepings, are at imminent risk of flooding. That is curious, given that for at least two decades the Environment Agency has predicted flood risk so inaccurately.

Floods have taken place everywhere, from Tewkesbury to Carlisle and from Stratford-upon-Avon to Gloucester, yet none of those has appeared on the Environment Agency’s flood risk maps. The Environment Agency seems to ignore both internal drainage and the reality of flooding, and it seems to me that its knowledge of real flood risk is a matter of question.

Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on how such agencies can be brought to account? I am thinking of Network Rail cutting down trees, of Natural England ignoring the stewardship of the countryside and now of the Environment Agency alarming and distressing very large numbers of my constituents. These people should be held to account by this House and be answerable to Ministers.

Mr Speaker: Some people think that we have already had the debate, but I always enjoy the mellifluous tones of the right hon. Gentleman and his unfailing invocation of literary testimony. He enjoys it, even more than we do.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an important issue for his constituency, and I understand his concern about unnecessary scaremongering. However, the chief executive of the Environment Agency does an excellent job; I would say that because I appointed her the chief executive of the Environment Agency does an excellent job; I would say that because I appointed her. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his concern about unnecessary scaremongering. However, the chief executive of the Environment Agency does an excellent job; I would say that because I appointed her. I bet they will be up all night writing that one. “Chapter one: we want to leave the EU, but the party won’t let us. Chapter two: please don’t vote for Farage! Chapter three: erm, that’s it.” I do not know whether the award for best comedy in a party political manifesto has yet been awarded, but it should definitely be delayed until we see that cracker.

We have not had an answer to the meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement, but I think that the House deserves one. The rumour is that the Government will bring it back next week, with Thursday being suggested. What are the Government’s plans for the meaningful vote? When, and in what form, will they bring it back? This purgatory cannot go on any longer. Nothing is being done. Important Bills need to be brought back to the House, and we need to get back to work. The House rose early on two days this week, and this place is quickly becoming an international laughing stock. All I can say is that, after 20 years of devolution, we are looking forward to completing the powers of our Parliament in Scotland, and it will be goodbye to this place.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): New data shows that there have been nearly 5,500 hoax calls to the West Midlands ambulance service in the past five years. Hoaxes call not only waste hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money, but put lives at risk due to delays in answering calls from patients who genuinely need help. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning those who make hoax calls to our emergency
services? Will she look for an opportunity to have a debate in Government time on the vital work that our ambulance services do and how we can all help to reduce the number of hoax calls for the future?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has raised a very serious issue. Hoax calls to any of our emergency services are absolutely to be condemned. She will no doubt be aware that ambulance services deal with more than 23,800 emergency calls every single day, and it is totally unacceptable for anyone to waste their time. The Government have introduced a significant increase in paramedic numbers to deal with the challenge facing our ambulance services, but I recommend that the hon. Lady seek an Adjournment debate so that she can discuss directly with Ministers what more can be done.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): To channel the spirit of my inner right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), somebody once wrote: “Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.”

Will the Leader of the House congratulate the 82 Members of Parliament who attended the training programme on autism awareness last week? I was proud that they wanted to change themselves and take on board the learning and exercise. Will she encourage the remainder of our colleagues from all parties to attend the future training courses that are being run by the all-party group on autism and the National Autistic Society? More importantly, will she ensure that people with autism and their families are catered for in the Bill on the restoration and renewal of the House, so that this country can have a Parliament that is the most autism-aware and friendly destination in the world?

Andrea Leadsom: I truly commend my right hon. Friend for her work on autism. It is excellent that that number of colleagues attended the autism training day, and I encourage as many Members as possible to get involved with that training. It is an absolutely key requirement of the restoration and renewal of this place that we do everything we can to make it accessible to those with particular disabilities or challenges, to make this the most person-friendly Parliament in the world when we come back to it in the 2030s.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, including the Backbench Business debates on Thursday.

I declare an interest: I am the chair of the all-party group on football supporters. In that light, I congratulate both Liverpool and Tottenham on their amazing comebacks over the past two nights. The television has been electric. Those were probably the best two comebacks since Lazarus all those years ago.

Meanwhile, in other parts of the country, football supporters are struggling with the dreadful ownership of their clubs. At Newcastle United, where I am a season ticket holder, we have Mike Ashley and to put up with everything that he delivers to us. Across the river in my own constituency, we have the situation at Gateshead football club, where Dr Ranjan Varghese and his financial adviser Joe Cala have sacked all the staff, including all the playing staff apart from one who has a contract that runs to June. The club is now talking about leaving the ground, which is owned by the local authority, and moving somewhere else. May we have a debate in Government time about the football authorities’ fit-and-proper-person test for being a club director? Frankly, these people are turning football into a joke.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in commending Liverpool and Spurs for their excellent results. It is great to see an all-English final. I hope that football clubs and managers all across the country listen to what the hon. Gentleman has said. It is vital that the excellent work done to promote sport, particularly football, throughout the country is properly managed and cared for. We have Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions on Thursday 23 May, and I recommend that the hon. Gentleman raise the issue then.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), I know that you, Mr Speaker, will of course have been absolutely amazed at what Liverpool did this week, but you will have been even more impressed by what happened last night, when Tottenham came back from an even more difficult situation.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the problems in football, but what has not been noticed is the long-term partnership between Tottenham Hotspur and the American National Football League. Two American football games will be played at the new Spurs ground next year, and this week the NFL announced that it will base its first academy at Barnet and Southgate College, where 80 youngsters will be taken in and given the opportunity for education and character development and to play American football. Premier league sides and the NFL are working together, so it is not all bad news. May we have a debate so that we can discuss these issues and in particular recognise the work that the NFL has done with its academy?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friends for their support for Government time for a debate. Members often raise their own pet issues. We regularly have debates on sport and the contribution that it can make to our national life, and it is right that we continue to consider these issues.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting forward the good side of some of the work done by football clubs in collaboration with other football leagues. I will certainly take away his request for Government time for a debate. Members often raise their own pet sports—mine being rugby, of course, rather than football, and we all know yours, Mr Speaker—and I will certainly take away that suggestion. We regularly have debates on sport and the contribution that it can make to our national life, and it is right that we continue to consider these issues.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): A recent study of 17,000 police personnel across the UK found that 95% of officers and two thirds of operational police staff have been exposed to traumatic events, with 20% reporting symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder. Will the Government consider making a statement on this health crisis in our police service?

Andrea Leadsom: The report that came out was extremely concerning, and this is an opportunity to pay tribute to the police for all the amazing work they do to keep us safe. The hon. Lady will know that, as part of our NHS long-term plan, mental health and support for mental
health issues are a high priority, as is achieving parity of esteem between mental health and physical health. We will see much more support available in the years to come. Nevertheless, she is right to raise the issue. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate perhaps to discuss it directly with Ministers.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As well as congratulating Liverpool and Spurs, I am sure that you will join me, Mr Speaker, in wishing Arsenal and Chelsea all the best for this evening so that we can have a full slate of English clubs in the European finals. On an even more serious point, may I ask for a debate on what one might almost call online economic terrorism against small businesses? Last week, I visited an excellent small business in my constituency that has been targeted over a certain matter, with a particular employee being the subject of that targeting. The business has been asked, or it has been told, that unless it fires that employee it will lose its money. Can the Leader of the House envisage a situation where that employee is using the internet to undermine the business? The business has been asked, or it has been told, that unless it fires that employee it will lose its money. Can the Leader of the House envisage a situation where that employee is using the internet to undermine the business?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very concerning issue about unfair intimidation of a business whatever the activity is of one of the employees. It is absolutely right that when enforcement is required the police support any business that is trying to defend an employee against unfair accusations. I do not know the precise details, but I would encourage him to speak directly to Ministers about what more can be done.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I wanted to ask the Leader of the House to celebrate Europe Day with me, but I know that is dangerous on your leave, it is going to shut its branch in Brora in Sutherland. This is yet another addition to a sickening litany of bank closures across the highlands. I know that I speak for many right hon. and hon. Members across the House when I say that we cannot go on like this; I cannot tell the House how upset my constituents are. Would the Leader of the House consider very strongly the possibility of a debate on the issue in this Chamber, because if we do not take action—if we do not try to do something—we will let down our constituents in every part of the UK?

Andrea Leadsom: I am well aware of the concern of many Members when there are bank branch closures in their constituencies; it is an issue for many people. The hon. Gentleman will also appreciate that banks are commercial businesses and the way that people are choosing to manage their financial affairs is changing. One step that the Government have taken is the access to banking protocol, which banks will consult broadly to ensure that they are not leaving people literally in the lurch. The work that the Government have done on investing in the post office network has been really important, resulting in 99.7% of the UK population now living within 3 miles of a post office branch.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Recent research has indicated that, if British households switched from eating meat for just one day a week, it would result in a reduction in carbon emissions equivalent to taking 16 million cars off our roads. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for the Environment on the importance of a healthier environment and healthier diets through less meat consumption?

Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend knows, we are committed to ensuring that there is a fair balance between farming and climate change, which is why mitigating climate change is explicitly listed among the public goods in our Agriculture Bill. However, he should also be aware that, although food choices can have an impact on greenhouse gas emissions, at the same time well-managed livestock farming provides environmental benefits such as supporting biodiversity; importantly, protecting the character of the countryside; and, of course, generating important income for rural communities.
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last night I received a Facebook message from somebody I know. I just want to read out a little part of it, if I may: “Dear Paula, I was wondering if you have had any experience of people suddenly having employment and support allowance being suddenly stopped. I get ESA. I’ve been in the support group for a while due to long-term conditions with my arm, bowel and epilepsy following being attacked by a patient at the hospital trust where I worked. I get PIP too. I had a work capability assessment a few weeks ago. Yesterday I got a letter to say it’s been stopped and I’m okay to work. I’m beside myself. I can’t sleep. I have always, for years, scored 15 points and now I’ve got zero. But nothing has changed.” Sometimes I honestly wonder how this wicked Government can do this to people. This is someone working in our NHS who was attacked, and now their benefits have been stopped; she is suffering mentally and physically. May we have a debate on how we can bring this terrible situation to an end and treat people with the dignity that they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is raising a very serious constituency issue. As ever, I will be happy to raise that particular case if she writes to me after business questions. However, I have to make it absolutely clear that, since the personal independence payment was introduced in 2013, it has been there to ensure that people had more control over their own lives. Four million decisions have been taken and almost nine in every 10 PIP claimants are satisfied with the overall experience. What the Government are seeking to do is to provide as much support as possible, as flexibly as possible, to people who need personal independence payments. Obviously the hon. Lady is talking about a particular issue that must be looked at, and hon. Members often do raise particular issues, but we must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. The whole premise of the Government, in looking at benefits for people who need them, is to provide support for those people.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): It has been apparent for some months that it was almost certain that we would be fighting the European elections, but yesterday the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirmed it. As a result of the late confirmation, a large number of local authorities have failed to send out forms or adequately ensure that the millions of European Union citizens in this country entitled to vote will be able to vote on 23 May. May I draw the Leader of the House’s attention to early-day motion 2357, tabled by myself and Members cross-party?

[That this House calls on the Government to take immediate steps to ensure that all EU citizens in the UK who wish to vote in the EU elections are able to do so by making the additional form available in polling stations, so that they can sign it there and confirm that they are voting only in this country and not in another European country, thereby enabling EU nationals legally resident here, with families here and working here, to vote in these European elections.]

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is asking me a specific policy question that is clearly one for the Cabinet Office and/or the Brexit Department. I would encourage him perhaps to lay a named question so that he can get a direct answer to his specific request.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): One year ago this week, Scottish musician Scott Hutchison died by suicide. Scott had been very open in talking about his mental health struggles, and through that, and his music and lyrics, he brought comfort and support to people all across the world. This week, in his honour, his family launched a charity called Tiny Changes to support young people with their mental health. We know that young people are struggling more and more often with their mental health, and with the mounting pressures of modern life, it is unlikely to get any better. So will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Scott, his work and his life and in thanking his family for their work? Could we please have a debate in Government time on young people’s mental health, so that we can come together and discuss this very important issue? Together we can make tiny changes.

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Lady for raising Scott’s story and I pay tribute to him and his family. It is just the most terrible thing when anyone takes their own life. I can tell her—I see she is quite moved—that a very good friend of my son also committed suicide, and he will also be taking action to try to raise money for those families who are struggling to ever get over this. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. The Government have the very first suicide prevention strategy, and we have many different measures that are being considered right across Departments to do what we can to try to prevent more suicides. She is absolutely right to raise this and I will see what can be done about a debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was not expecting to be called until the end, because I would like to raise with the Leader of the House the situation at Carriage Gates, which is not strictly a matter of the business of the House. I am concerned that the incessant loud noise, which is being made not in the context of specific demonstrations but at varying times, is taking us back to a situation prior to 2010. Not only does it cause distraction, particularly in Westminster Hall, but, much more importantly, it has a huge effect on the police who are guarding the gates and have to be on the alert, as we know only too well, against attack. There are byelaws about this. I do not care which side of the EU argument the shouters are on—probably both sides—but it needs to be stopped. I wonder what the Leader of the House can do about this matter because one of her predecessors, Sir George Young, proved very effective in tackling it with Westminster City Council.

Mr Speaker: Yes, that was in 2012—I remember it well.
Andrea Leadsom: I regularly meet the director of security in the Palace and the Director General to talk about the challenges we face when going about our everyday work. I have raised the demonstrations going on outside, but not specifically the noise. Since my right hon. Friend makes that point, I will undertake to raise that issue the next time I speak to the DG.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I have had two yellowing newspaper front pages pinned to the wall in my office for nearly two years now, with headlines saying, “Five years for monsters who harm animals” and “Five years’ jail for cruelty to pets”. A Bill was published and then withdrawn. My constituents and thousands of people around the country have run a fantastic campaign to ensure that those who are cruel to animals are punished with severe sentences, which they are not at the moment. Where is the Bill? No more talk—we must have it in Parliament.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Lady that cruelty to animals is utterly unacceptable. We are a nation of animal lovers and want to see perpetrators brought to justice. She is right that the Government need to take action to increase maximum sentences for animal cruelty, and that Bill will be brought forward in an animals Bill in the next Session. In the meantime, the Government have improved animal welfare through many different measures, such as making CCTV mandatory in slaughterhouses. We are bringing forward a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. We have banned online and third-party puppy sales, and our world-leading ivory sales ban demonstrates our commitment to do everything we can to protect animals around the world.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Leader of the House recognises the importance of grassroots sports in promoting physical and mental wellbeing in our communities. Will she take the time to recognise the great work that the parkrun project does across all parts of the UK, and particularly in my constituency? The Springburn parkrun, which was set up in the wake of the Commonwealth games in Glasgow with some of the legacy funding, is celebrating its fifth anniversary this Saturday. Every week, people can go along at half-past 9 to run, and it is not against each other, but to improve their fitness and their time each week. Will she recognise that great initiative?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the value of community initiatives such as parkrun in keeping people fit and motivated, with a bit of social company. It is a fantastic thing to do, and I congratulate his constituents on their work.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My 16-year-old constituent, Jackson Shepherd, has severe special needs, including learning disabilities, very limited communication and an inability to attend to daily needs such as washing and clothing himself. He is a student at the fantastic Riverbrae School for those with additional and complex support needs. However, his dad has been told that Jackson cannot claim universal credit because he cannot undergo a work capability assessment, as he is a student and therefore cannot work. Can we have a debate on this Government’s policies on supporting young adults with additional and complex needs, to ensure that people like Jackson do not fall through the net?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important constituency issue, as he often does. I encourage him to raise it directly with Ministers, and if he wants to write to me after business questions, I can take it up on his behalf. He will be aware that the Government are determined to ensure that people with disabilities—in particular, young people—are able to lead fulfilling lives and achieve as much as possible. To that end, we are spending £55 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions, which is up by more than £10 billion in real terms since 2010.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The Ministry of Justice’s own policy framework states that all prisons should develop specific multidisciplinary pathways for pregnant and post-natal women. Birth Companions, a maternity rights charity, has raised concerns that current practices are failing short. Please may we have a debate in Government time to discuss maternity services before, during and post sentencing so that we can better improve life chances for mothers and their children?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue, and one that is dear to my heart. It is certainly vital in the perinatal period that women, their babies and their partners are given the support they need to get every baby off to the best start in life. I am not aware of exactly where Government policy is on this, but I encourage the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the issue with a Minister.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Even if the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) had momentarily forgotten the brilliance of his inquiry, the rest of us, thankfully, had not.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Government have failed to increase stamp duty on purchases of properties by overseas buyers by 3%, instead cutting it back to 1%, which has resulted in less money being available for tackling homelessness. This is not just a rough deal on the homeless who have to sleep rough, but a rough deal on young people who want to buy houses that are forced out of reach by house price inflation. May we have a debate in Government time on the Government’s failure to join up housing policy, and its impact on our constituents and people who are facing homelessness?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman started off by saying something about a change in Government policy that I did not fully follow. However, I draw his attention to Treasury questions on 21 May, when he might like to raise his specific question. I can say to him that the Government are doing everything possible to eradicate homelessness. Our Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 means that everyone, not just those who are a priority, can get more support before becoming homeless, which is absolutely vital. There is also our rough sleeping initiative, working with local authorities with the highest levels of rough sleeping, which is demonstrating a 19% decrease in rough sleeping across the areas where it
Mr Speaker, for pushing that forward. Parliament has made much progress in recent years, but late-night votes and an archaic voting system that can mean MPs walking around in circles through the Lobbies for several hours on end can be off-putting. May we have a debate in Government time about how we can make Parliament a more accessible workplace?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am delighted—congratulations to the hon. Lady and her husband. That is fantastic news, and we all share in wishing her a fabulous pregnancy with no sickness, tiredness, or anything of that sort. She is right to say that proxy voting was an important step as many more new families come to this place, and it is right for the diversity of the House of Commons that many more young parents are coming here as representatives. I commit to doing everything I can to make this place more family friendly. The issues of how we vote and the late timing are matters for the House, and I encourage the hon. Lady to seek either a Westminster Hall debate or a Backbench Business Committee debate so that all hon. Members can share their views. Surprisingly to me and to her, not all hon. Members share our view about making this place family friendly.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Lady will certainly get the Westminster Hall debate, and she should have a word with her hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) about the Backbench Business Committee debate.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Only yesterday, Clydesdale Bank announced that it would close its branch in Largs. That is the latest blow to my constituency, as yet another bank abandons our communities, leading to increasing concerns about financial exclusion, and all the implications that that poses for consumers, small businesses and the future of our high streets. May we have a debate in Government time about the social responsibility of banks, and a proper investigation into banking hubs for every community?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sorry that the hon. Lady is the second Scottish parliamentary representative to raise a bank branch closure in their constituency during business questions, and I agree that bank closures are difficult for our constituents. She will be aware of the access to banking arrangements, under which banks must consult and demonstrate that there is no commercial value to be had from a bank branch, and that alternative arrangements are in place to suit the needs of the local community. In many cases those arrangements are provided by local post offices. The Government have invested £2.3 billion in the post office network since 2010, meaning that post offices are open for an extra 200,000 hours a week, with more than 4,000 opening on Sunday. Nevertheless, the hon. Lady makes an important point, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate on the issue.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Chris Bryant.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): You are generous, Mr Speaker, especially because I am a naughty boy and was not entirely in the Chamber when the business question started. I am grateful to you—thank you very much. Would the Leader of the House care to come and visit me in my constituency and perhaps stay overnight? [HON. MEMBERS: “Oooh!”] We have a spare room—it's
Andrea Leadsom: What can I say, other than that you were clearly tricked by the hon. Gentleman sneaking in under the radar, Mr Speaker? I hope you are not losing your touch. I find that invitation almost entirely irresistible, and I would be delighted to visit the Rhondda. May I commend the hon. Gentleman’s local brass band, the Cory Band, and congratulate it on its superb achievements?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Offensive Weapons Bill seeks to strengthen legislation on weapons such as knives. The Bill is important, but friends in the Sikh community were concerned that it would impinge on their freedom to carry the kirpan, or ceremonial sword, which is an ingrained part of their religious practice similar to wearing a cross. There must always be a balance between freedom and public safety. I am delighted that the Government have considered that balance and amended the Bill to accommodate Sikh religious freedom. That positive result highlights the importance of considering freedom of religion or belief in all Government policy. Will the Leader of the House join me and others in welcoming that decision?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted the hon. Gentleman raises this issue. He is absolutely right to point out that the Government fully support religious freedom. The Government were pleased that the issue of wearing the kirpan was brought to their attention, so that the Offensive Weapons Bill could be amended and the protection of religious freedoms of the Sikh community ensured.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Those who claim asylum in the UK as third country applicants are currently waiting up to two or even three years for a decision. The Guardian reported last week that the third country unit was massively overworked and understaffed. May we please have a debate on the very real human cost of Home Office understaffing for those who rely on these decisions?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very serious issue, and I encourage her to raise it directly with Ministers. She will be aware that the UK has a very generous commitment to helping refugees who seek asylum. She raises the effectiveness of the arrangements around administering those cases. It is right that she should take that up directly with the Home Office. If she wants to write to me after business questions, I can raise it with them on her behalf.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): May we please have a debate on the application of section 4 of the Ministerial and other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991? I understand that Ministers come and go, and that the Government are in a permanent state of reshuffle, but I personally do not think it is right that those who are sacked or forced to resign because of serious allegations get a five-figure pay-off funded by the taxpayer.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I encourage him to raise it in a written question, so he can get a specific answer to his point.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Earlier this week, I received a letter from Father Liam McMahon, who is the parish priest at St Michael’s on Gallowgate in Parkhead. Like many other ministers and those in the clergy, he is concerned about the changes to tier 5 religious worker visas. May we have a debate in Government time about early-day motion 2362, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), to ensure that the Home Office reverses these retrograde plans that will disproportionately impact parishes right across the United Kingdom?

[That this House notes with concern the decision of the Home Office to remove Ministers of Religion from the eligibility criteria for tier 5 entry visas to the UK; further notes the widespread disappointment about this decision felt by Churches and other faith communities which have previously been able to invite religious ministers from overseas, and particularly developing countries, to provide supply cover for religious services over the coming months; believes this will have a negative effect on the ability of priests and ministers in the UK to take a break over the summer, on faith communities who may experience reduced worship schedules, and on the supply ministers who have used the opportunity to gain experience in the UK and earn some additional income before returning to their home country; and calls on the Home Secretary to meet with representatives of faith communities to listen to their concerns and urgently review his Department’s policy decision.]

I know the Leader of the House is sympathetic and a practising Christian. Will she be a voice in Government to U-turn on this ridiculous decision by the Home Office that will affect parishes all across these islands?

Andrea Leadsom: This issue has been raised a couple of times. Of course, we want to be able to facilitate visits by religious leaders around the world to talk to parishes here in the United Kingdom. There are arrangements—I am struggling to remember, but I think they can apply under tier 2 visa arrangements and that there are some pauses in place to ensure that those visas remain temporary. I recommend that the hon. Gentleman seeks an Adjournment debate, so that Ministers can set out for him precisely how visitors can apply for visas.
12.3 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the remediation of private sector residential buildings with aluminium composite material cladding.

In the wake of the tragic Grenfell Tower fire, the Government acted urgently to address the serious fire and public safety risks exposed by the tragedy. Throughout, the safety of residents has remained our priority. We have from the outset sought expert advice, which together with our own testing programme has highlighted the unparalleled fire risk posed by ACM cladding of the type believed to be present on Grenfell Tower. The Government are clear that the type of ACM cladding believed to be on Grenfell Tower, and present on hundreds of other high-rise buildings, is not safe. This type of ACM is exceptional owing to the high risk it poses as an accelerant of fire. It did not comply with building regulations and should never have been put up.

For many years, building regulations have included a requirement that exterior walls be constructed to resist the spread of fire. Since the Grenfell tragedy, we have taken action to put that beyond doubt. We have amended the law to explicitly ban combustible materials from use in the exterior walls of all high-rise residential buildings, as well as in hospitals, residential care premises, dormitories in boarding schools, and student accommodation over 18 metres. That ban applies to all new buildings in these categories and to those buildings when major works to the exterior walls take place. The long-standing requirement that exterior walls should adequately resist the spread of fire continues to apply to all other high-rise buildings, including commercial buildings, being developed or undergoing major works to exterior walls.

With the support of local authorities and fire and rescue services, we have identified a total of 433 high-rise residential and other buildings with unsafe ACM cladding. All these buildings have been assessed by fire and rescue services and interim safety measures are in place where necessary, and these measures are kept under review by fire and rescue services, but we recognise that residents will have true peace of mind only when unsafe cladding has been removed and replaced with safe materials. In those buildings owned by local authorities and housing associations, we are making strong progress. We have made £400 million available to pay for the remediation of ACM cladding, and remediation has started or been completed in 87% of social sector buildings, with plans and commitments in place to remediate all remaining buildings.

We have also seen some progress in the private sector. Some building owners have acted swiftly and responsibly to put plans in place for full remediation of the cladding on their buildings and committed to protecting leaseholders from bearing the costs. This progress has been supported by the work of a remediation taskforce chaired by Ministers. In addition, where necessary, the Government are supporting local authorities to use their enforcement powers to ensure that building owners take the required action.

That said, too many building owners have failed to take responsibility. Many building owners have been too slow to co-operate to enable the prompt identification of buildings with unsafe ACM cladding and have since dragged their feet in planning for remediation. The result is that, almost two years on from the Grenfell tragedy, an unacceptable number of residents are still living in buildings that, while benefiting from additional safety measures in the interim, will not be remediated fully within an acceptable timescale.

Moreover, many leaseholders face unfair, and often substantial, costs. The Government believe this to be completely unacceptable. Leaseholders find themselves in this position through no fault of their own, and this is not morally defensible. The Housing Minister, my officials and I have all met residents affected by these issues and heard their personal concerns. We all appreciate their anguish and we pay tribute to their resilience and strength. I also want to acknowledge the continued work of Grenfell United, the UK Cladding Action Group and others. Many people told us they lived in constant fear—fear for the safety of their home; fear of the possibility of having to find tens of thousands of pounds for remediation; fear that they could no longer sell their properties and may have to forfeit them if costs are not met.

Where building owners have failed to step up, it is now imperative that the Government act. We must ensure the long-term safety of the people living in these buildings. The Government are therefore announcing today a new fund to unblock progress in remediating private sector high-rise residential buildings. First and foremost, this fund is about public safety. It will allow remediation to happen quickly, restore peace of mind and allow residents living in these blocks to get on with their lives. It will also protect leaseholders from bearing the cost. Building owners or those responsible for fire safety should prioritise getting on with the work necessary to make their buildings permanently safe. The new fund, which is estimated at £200 million, will cover the full cost of remediating the unsafe ACM cladding systems in privately owned high-rise residential buildings. This funding is being provided entirely for the benefit of the leaseholders in the buildings.

Important reforms of leasehold and implementing the Hackitt review’s recommendations on the safety of high-rise residential buildings are already in train. I will update the House on implementation in the coming weeks. When the new system is in place, it will help to prevent leaseholders from being confronted with unaffordable one-off charges.

Several developers and freeholders have already agreed to fund the costs of remediation and not to pass them on to leaseholders. Many of them have already agreed to maintain their commitment. The owners or developers who have made those commitments include Taylor Wimpey, Legal & General, Mace Group, Lendlease, Barratt Developments and Aberdeen Standard Investments. I commend them for the responsible and moral position that they have taken.

The fund does not absolve industry from taking responsibility for the failures that led to the ACM being wrongly put on buildings. As a condition of funding, we will stipulate that building owners must pursue warranty and insurance claims and any appropriate action against those responsible for putting unsafe cladding on the buildings, with moneys to be repaid to the Government.

We will write to all potential fund applicants by the end of next week to start engaging them in preparation for formal applications. We will also make funding
conditional on the building owner or responsible person agreeing a contract to start remediation works within a set period. We will provide further details on the application process; I urge those who intend to apply to start developing ACM remediation proposals and costings so that applications can be made and processed promptly.

Everyone has a right to feel safe in their home. We want to see building owners acting to ensure that unsafe ACM is replaced without delay. That is why we are taking this exceptional step today. I commend this statement to the House.

12.10 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. His announcement is welcome and needed; most important, it should start to relieve the worry of the thousands of people who live day and night in a high-rise block that they know is unsafe. But why on earth have they had to wait for nearly two years? For two years they have had their lives on hold. How long will the thousands more who live in tower blocks with suspect non-ACM cladding have to wait for Government action?

Like the Secretary of State, I pay tribute to those who, with Labour, have campaigned hard for the Government to act: Grenfell United, the UK Cladding Action Group, the Manchester Cladiators, Inside Housing and hon. Members on both sides of the House. But after the solemn pledges made by the Prime Minister and other Ministers in the aftermath of the terrible Grenfell Tower fire, who would have thought that nearly two years later there would still be Grenfell residents in hotels and temporary accommodation, not permanent homes; that Grenfell-type cladding would still not have been replaced in almost eight in 10 blocks; that in over half of them, no work would have started at all; and that no comprehensive testing programme would have been done on the estimated 1,700 high-rise or high-risk buildings with dangerous non-ACM cladding? The Secretary of State says that the Government acted urgently. The sorry truth is that in the face of these post-Grenfell problems, the Government have been frozen like a rabbit in the headlights—too weak and too slow to act at every stage and on every front.

On the detail of the Secretary of State’s announcement, is the £200 million new money from the Treasury to his Department, or will it be taken from other housing programmes? Is the fund simply a bail-out for block owners and developers who will not do their duty to replace dangerous cladding? How will he ensure that they pursue liability claims and repay the public purse? Will he consider emergency legislation to make block owners actually do this work and pay for it?

Is the fund enough? Per block, it seems to be only half the funding announced last year for the social sector. The Secretary of State says that the fund will cover the costs for 170 privately owned blocks that have Grenfell-style ACM cladding. Will he fund the costs for other blocks that are found to have similarly dangerous non-ACM cladding?

I have to tell the Secretary of State that warm words and fresh funding will mean very little to worried residents unless they know that the dangerous cladding on all blocks will be removed and replaced, and that as leaseholders they will not pick up the bill. Will he now set a hard deadline for that work, so that every block and every resident can be made safe?

James Brokenshire: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for our announcement. It is right that the Government have acted, but I underline the fact that the primary responsibility rests and rested with the building owners and with those responsible. We have now stepped in because of the failures we have seen in the private sector, although we acknowledge and recognise the many building owners and developers who have done the right thing by stepping up and agreeing to provide or maintain funding to address the need for remediation.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about urgency and timing. We did act with urgency in terms of the advice given. Indeed, I indicated in my statement the challenges in identifying some of the blocks affected and the work that was done at pace with local authorities. In some cases, local authorities had to take enforcement action to enable us to survey and identify those buildings, working with the relevant fire authorities, to which I pay tribute for their analysis and advice, and with the expert panel that was set up to advise Ministers.

The right hon. Gentleman asked several questions about the nature and manner of my announcement. One question was about non-ACM cladding systems. He will know that a testing programme is under way to assess non-ACM systems. That work is already happening. Advice was provided by the expert panel in December 2017 and updated in December 2018. That has been the focus, but clearly we will act on information and evidence provided as a consequence of the further testing programme. However, I urge the right hon. Gentleman to be careful not to prejudge the outcome or the results that we expect in the weeks ahead.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about funding. We intend to manage funding for the policy through our existing significant programme budgets. To put that in context, if the full amount were used, it would represent something like 3% of this year’s financial programming. We will keep the House updated through the supplementary estimate. The size of the new fund is informed by the public sector fund’s utilisation and drawdown, by the financial support that has been provided by some of the developers and builders, and by the insurance that has been activated for a number of the buildings.

With respect to the follow-through, clearly we want action to be taken to continue with liability claims. That process will be managed as we work with each of the building owners. As I indicated, we intend to start the process by the end of next week, by writing to the owners of the buildings that have been identified based on the information that we have.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked about legislation. We have supported local authorities in their enforcement activity through the joint inspection team. We remain ready, willing and able to support local authorities in the enforcement activity that they may determine to be necessary, and we are clarifying rules, regulations and guidance to assist them in that regard.

Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman, however, that I am very clear about the fact that the current regulatory regime needs further significant change. That is why the Hackitt review was undertaken in the first place. In her report, Dame Judith Hackitt presented a very stark picture of the need for responsibility, for tougher sanctions and, indeed, for different regulatory
arrangements. I propose to update the House on next steps in the coming weeks, because I hear that message very clearly, and I intend to act.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, and thank both him and the Minister of State. I know that achieving this result has required significant legal complexities to be overcome, and I appreciate the fact that the Government have listened. This will come as a great relief to the residents of Northpoint, in my constituency, who, along with many others, have suffered stress as well as financial loss.

Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the fund will cover all cladding systems which include ACM cladding? As he knows, some cladding systems consist of a mixture of ACM and other forms of cladding, and it is obviously right for all systems to be subject to this protection.

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend for his strenuous efforts on behalf of his constituents in relation to Northpoint. I understand the issue that he has highlighted. The fund is intended to provide capital support for the removal of ACM cladding systems, including insulation, as well as the removal and disposal of existing cladding, replacement materials and labour. As part of the process of writing to building owners and of the subsequent work, we will specify that in greater detail to give reassurance.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement. Any announcement of help for those affected by the Grenfell tragedy, directly or indirectly, must of course be welcomed, but as the second anniversary of the tragedy approaches, it is incredible that the public and MPs are still having to push for that help.

The first thing to establish is whether the fund will be enough to help those affected. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the £200 million that has been released will pay for work on all private towers, or are the reports that it will not be enough correct?

The replacement work has been described by the UK Cladding Action Group as a “cladding lottery”, because it covers only ACM panels of the type that helped to spread the fire at Grenfell. Combustible non-ACM cladding, and other fire safety problems such as faulty or missing fire breaks in wall systems, will not be covered. What additional action can the Secretary of State promise affected residents to ensure that these safety measures are completed in a full and joined-up manner?

People have reported losing their life savings on interim measures, being forced to delay starting a family because of the financial uncertainty or turning to drink or drugs, along with serious mental health issues. Does the Secretary of State believe it is acceptable that freeholders and developers have been allowed simply to refuse to pay to make their buildings safe, and does he believe that if changes to the law are required to force them to take their responsibilities seriously, the Government will give that serious consideration?

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming my announcement. I should, for his sake, make it clear that this applies only in England, because, as he knows, responsibility for housing policy and building regulations is a devolved matter.

I have already responded to some of the points that the hon. Gentleman has raised. As I have said, the £200 million represents an estimate of the cost, based on the existing experience of remediation—some of the work that has already been done—and taking account of instances in which developers, or insurance, are already in place. It is there to provide capital support. It is because of the need for urgency that we are taking steps to ensure, as a priority, that there is no need to rely on interim measures, because of both the nature and the cost of such measures.

I absolutely endorse the hon. Gentleman’s broader point about the need for developers and freeholders to stand up and do the right thing: I have stated that very plainly on a number of occasions, and I am hugely frustrated by the action—or lack of action—on the part of a number of those involved. He asked about changes in the law: that issue clearly flows from the Hackitt review, and, as I have said, I will update the House.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I welcome the statement, but does the Secretary of State share my concern about the difficulties that the Department has had to surmount in order to be in a position to make such a statement, and about the fact that it was necessary in the first place? As he has said, many in the industry have acted responsibly and swiftly, but too many have not. May I encourage him, as he finishes—quickly, I hope—the work involved in responding to the Hackitt review, to apply that learning and the experience of just how difficult it has been for him and his Department to put this programme together, and to reflect in his response the fact that many residents have the same issues, day in day out, with the owners of the buildings in which they live? We should all bear in mind that while those owners are quite happy to take the gains that come with owning a building, they must also take the responsibilities that it brings.

James Brokenshire: I entirely agree with the points that my right hon. Friend has made. I think that she senses my real frustration and, indeed, anger at some of the practice that I have seen. We are taking this exceptional step because of the nature of the material with which we are dealing, but it has also shone a light on some of the wrongful and damaging practice that is out there, including practice in the construction industry. We are continuing to pursue those issues, and will follow through on them in our response to the Hackitt review.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I very much welcome the money, although I have to say that the Department’s idea of urgency is not quite the same as mine. Two years after Grenfell, I think that the Secretary of State was wise to make his statement just under the wire, before the second anniversary of that disaster. If he will be writing to owners in the next week or so, he presumably already knows what steps he will be asking them to take to comply with the requirement to seek compensation from those who installed the cladding when that is possible. If he knows what steps will be taken, will he share that information with us, and will he also tell us who will decide whether those steps are sufficient?

James Brokenshire: In the case of an individual building, it will be up to the owners to set out what steps will be required. Obviously we will inform them of the nature
Sir Peter Bottomley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and for his campaigning on these issues of fire safety, as well as leasehold, over many months. Regardless of whether I look forward to coverage in Inside Housing, I recognise the work it has done in assisting and helping to shine a light on a number of these factors. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are programmes of work by the Law Society and other agencies, and the Law Commission’s overarching work on leasehold is a separate programme that we intend to continue. We will continue to engage with the hon. Gentleman and others in relation to progress on that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Secretary of State explain how this welcome scheme will work in a couple of respects? Is the list of 433 vulnerable buildings going to be published? How will those who might be living in a building where no work has been done be able to access the scheme, and will any of the money be recoverable from the freeholders who refuse to do the work of their own volition?

James Brokenshire: We are aware of all the survey work and other steps that local government has been involved in, and I pay tribute to local councillors for their active engagement, alongside fire authorities, in enabling us to arrive at this position. As I have said, we want claims to continue to be made against those with responsibility and liability, whether through warranty claims or insurance, and to see that moneys are repaid. There are 175 private residential buildings and 159 social residential buildings where ACM cladding has been identified, and steps and interim measures will be in place to give assurance now. We will continue to engage with the authorities and building owners as we make progress in this regard.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Last March six buildings in the centre of Leeds were identified as still having dangerous ACM cladding. The freeholders of some of them have announced they would meet the cost, but for constituents of mine who live in buildings where that commitment has not been given, today’s announcement will be very welcome, and I thank the Secretary of State for it. Can he clarify the following two points? First, will freeholders who have said they will pay for the work but have not begun it be eligible for the funding? Secondly, as the Secretary of State will be aware, many people have for months and months been paying the cost of waking watches, and those who have been most heavily penalised are those with freeholders who have not lived up to their responsibilities, which is why they are still paying for a waking watch. Who does the Secretary of State think ought to meet those costs? In my view, speaking on behalf of my constituents it should not be them, as this is an unjustifiable expense which is not their fault.

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman will have heard me say previously where I think moral responsibility lies. It should not be leaseholders who pick up the cost, which is why I am making the statement today in relation to the capital costs and making progress so that waking watches and other interim measures are minimised and forestalled. On the question of freeholders, in essence the scheme is available to all private sector buildings that fall within its remit, potentially including those where commitments have already been
made, but, as I have said, a number of those developers and building owners have said that, notwithstanding that, they maintain their commitment and we are trying to keep this simple and make sure we meet all legal requirements so that there is swift progress.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and his work and that of the Minister for Housing in securing this fund. This was a tough decision, but it is the right decision, and it seems to have gone even further than the Select Committee recommendation of a low-interest loan. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that this is a grant rather than a loan and in no circumstances is it repayable by the long leaseholders?

James Brokenshire: I can give my hon. Friend that confirmation, and I pay tribute to him for his steadfast work on the Select Committee and outside in championing these issues. I also join him in paying tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing who has also been steadfast in advancing the issues of concern. We looked at questions such as whether a loan arrangement could work but ultimately, given the complexity, the time that would have been involved and the need for all sorts of different consents, and given that my priority is providing a sense of assurance for leaseholders and getting on with this, we decided to adopt this structure.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his announcement. We in Tower Hamlets have among the highest number of ACM-clad blocks so it is very welcome, but it has taken two years and people fighting tooth and nail to get here, particularly the campaign groups as well as Members across the House. Although the amount of money is welcome, does the Secretary of State believe that it is adequate to cover the number of properties affected, and will he today commit to look at the 1,700 high-rise and high-risk blocks with dangerous non-ACM cladding so that their residents can sleep at night in peace without having to campaign for a further two years for us to get to this point again? I welcome the work of the Secretary of State and the Minister but we need urgent action on those outstanding properties too.

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, through the inputs of the expert panel in relation to non-ACM systems, we have already provided advice to building owners, which was refreshed again last December. We have the testing programme that has commenced and we are looking at the results carefully. I do highlight the exceptional nature of the ACM material and the advice we have seen that underlines the exceptional steps I am taking today. I do understand the frustration, strain and stress that so many people living in these blocks have felt and continue to feel. On costs, we have assessed the inputs of the expert panel in relation to non-ACM and stress that so many people living in these blocks have felt and continue to feel. On costs, we have assessed the inputs of the expert panel in relation to non-ACM and will he today commit to look at the 1,700 high-rise and high-risk blocks with dangerous non-ACM cladding so that their residents can sleep at night in peace without having to campaign for a further two years for us to get to this point again? I welcome the work of the Secretary of State and the Minister but we need urgent action on those outstanding properties too.

James Brokenshire: It is worth explaining to the hon. Gentleman that, as a matter of law, responsibility and liability effectively fall on the leaseholders themselves—court cases have demonstrated this—and the aim of this scheme is to protect those leaseholders. We want to ensure that we make progress and deal with the public safety issues that I have already described. Yes, we are obviously working with those building owners as a point of contact, but that does not in any way cut against the other points that I have made about those who are responsible, about liability, about insurance and about other factors, which we are obviously building within the scheme as well.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome this announcement and echo the words of support that the Secretary of State has expressed for Grenfell United, the UK Cladding Action Group and others who have campaigned on this issue. Will he clarify one point in relation to his statement? He said that the funding would be conditional on the building owner “agreeing a contract to start remediation works within a set period.” Can he say what that set period will be? Can he also tell us what will happen if they do not do it within that set period? Would he perhaps be willing to name and shame those who are unwilling to take their responsibilities seriously?

James Brokenshire: I entirely understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point. He has expressed the frustration that so many of us feel. There are companies that have done the right thing, and I have named a number of companies that are still fulfilling and standing up behind the commitments that they have already made. Equally, however, there are those that have not done so. He asked about the condition. We are trying to find a way of acting as a lever or catalyst. We can say, “Okay, you have made an application and accepted those works, but we need to have a means of staying in contact to get an update to ensure that the work is actually being
done.” For me, what matters is seeing that the action is followed through and fulfilled. It is difficult to give the right hon. Gentleman a set period, because of the different nature of the works required on each building. Different cases will require different works, but the purpose behind the condition is to ensure that those buildings are remediated.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am not sure that the Secretary of State responded to the last question that the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), asked him, which was whether there was a hard deadline by which all the work had to be done and all the cladding removed from private and social buildings. If there is no such deadline, why not?

James Brokenshire: I thought I had responded to the question on timing. We know from experience that the remediation and construction works could take many months in some cases, so it is difficult to set a specific period. Each building and each set of circumstances will be different, and the nature of the works required will therefore be different. However, if the hon. Lady is saying that we need to act at pace and with a sense of urgency, I entirely agree with her. That is why we have sought to construct the scheme in this way, and we will follow through to ensure that action is taken.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is almost two years since the horrifying and deadly Grenfell Tower fire, and I find it unacceptable that almost eight in 10 of the other blocks across our country identified as having Grenfell-style cladding have not had it removed and replaced. Why have the Government taken so long to act, after their solemn promise to the nation? Will the Secretary of State now set a deadline by which all blocks have to be made safe? And importantly, if this money is to come from the existing budget, will he tell us what the Government will not be doing?

James Brokenshire: On the latter point, I have already indicated how we intend to manage this, and we will keep the House updated through the normal supplementary estimates process. The hon. Gentleman talks about his frustration—it is also my frustration—that so many private sector freeholders have just not acted. We needed to take action to identify the enforcement action that councils needed to take to determine whether the material was on those buildings. I understand his frustration and the strain that this has placed on so many people living in those blocks. That is why we have taken this exceptional action today; ultimately, the responsibility should reside with the building owners to take the steps that they have failed to take thus far. I judge that today’s action is absolutely necessary because of the pace that we have not seen from them.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Public safety should always come first, and the Secretary of State’s announcement today is welcome indeed, but why is it that, two years on from the Grenfell Tower tragedy and despite the assurances given at the time, not one single penny has been forthcoming to make safe the 213 tower blocks in Birmingham and their 10,000 households? Crucially, this is despite the fact that work has been recommended by the West Midlands fire service on the installation of sprinklers. Will the Secretary of State do what he has quite rightly done in relation to the residents of private tower blocks, and will he agree to meet a delegation of Birmingham tenants from those 213 council tower blocks?

James Brokenshire: I would underline the support that we have given to public sector buildings, the £400 million fund that was committed last year and the progress that is being made on the removal of ACM cladding from buildings on the public sector estate. We are learning from that process in terms of the implementation and the steps that I am announcing today. The hon. Gentleman highlights broader fire safety measures, and building owners obviously have responsibilities in that regard. I note that he has raised the issue of sprinklers the past. We are looking at that in the context of new buildings through what is known as approved document B. Sprinklers can clearly be effective in a number of cases, and we have worked with councils and others to discuss funding flexibilities to deliver on that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I find it very difficult to squeeze out a thank you for this statement. What a mess this has been! What a rotten time people have had! For two years, many people in this country have had a miserable existence, not knowing what will happen and not knowing how much debt they are getting into or whether they will be able to repay what they have borrowed. When we goeg “building regulations”, up pops the Department. This Government are shilly-shallying. I do not have one of these buildings in my constituency, but we have them in Yorkshire. The fact is that this Government have looked for scapegoats all the time. They blame the construction industry, the local authorities and the freeholders. The Secretary of State has been doing it this morning. All those people thought they were complying with building regulations; they thought they were complying with the law as it stood. Then we had the dreadful disaster of Grenfell and of course the door opened to disputes. The lawyers came in, and that is always bad news. Ordinary working people have suffered for two years, and the Secretary of State does not get much credit from me this morning.

James Brokenshire: I absolutely understand the pressure and strain that so many people have felt they were under, but actually we have taken steps to work with fire authorities and local authorities in this regard. The hon. Gentleman makes a number of assertions, and he almost seems to suggest that those who wrongly put up this ACM material in the first place and who have wrongly failed to act have no responsibility at all. I encourage him to read the Hackitt review. Yes, it sets out in great detail where the law needs to be changed, and I have accepted that. I have said that we will take further steps in that regard, but there is equally responsibility placed on the construction sector and the private sector. I strongly encourage him to read that report.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): This announcement is long overdue, but it is nevertheless welcome. On a number of affected sites in my constituency, such as the Durkan-owned Babbage Point development in west Greenwich, the building owner has the necessary planning permission but is dragging their feet, with the significant cost of a permanent waking watch being
[Matthew Pennycook]
passed on to leaseholders. I noted what the Secretary of State said about the funding being conditional on works beginning within a set period, but may I press him on the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)? What more is the Secretary of State willing to do beyond appeals to morality to ensure that private building owners, not leaseholders, bear the full cost of the interim fire safety measures that have been necessary, in many cases, because building owners have not acted promptly?

James Brokenshire: The key thing is obviously to make quick progress, and I note what the hon. Gentleman says about that building. Part of the response involves continuing to work with local authorities on enforcement action where different building owners are not taking the steps they should in a timely fashion. I will certainly be interested to receive any more details on that specific case. There are legal liabilities regarding where responsibilities rest, but I want to see progress being made quickly. If there are examples of building owners dragging their feet, we want to hear about them so that we can work with local authorities to see that action is taken.

Acquired Brain Injury

12.51 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the report of the All Party Parliamentary Group on acquired brain injury and supports its conclusions; and urges the Government to work through all of its departments to ensure that those who have sustained brain injuries are guaranteed full neuro-rehabilitation as needed.

I rise to speak in support of the motion in my name and those of my hon. Friends, including those on the other side of the House—I see the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) taking his place now.

Sometimes a brain injury is really obvious—jagged bone where the skull has been fractured or penetrated—but often the sheer force of the soft tissue colliding at speed against the hard inside of the skull bruises the brain, leading to a contusion or a haemorrhage that is outwardly invisible. Likewise, blunt trauma, where the head smashes into a windscreen or the road, means that the brain is pulled away from the opposite side of the skull, leading to even worse damage. The same can happen on the rugby, football, or hockey field, in the boxing ring and on the racecourse. Repeated incidents, even minor ones, can lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy or what is often known as “punch drunk syndrome”.

Injuries can also be caused by stroke, tumours, infection, carbon monoxide exposure and hypoxia—oxygen starvation. These are hidden injuries with complex and fluctuating life-changing effects that strike close to the heart of what it is to be human, to be conscious, to be alive and, in many cases, to want to be alive.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am sorry that I cannot stay for the whole debate but, prompted by my hon. Friend’s excellent work in this area, I recently visited the Second Chance Headway Centre in Wakefield, which supports people with brain injuries. I was struck by the spectrum of conditions that the centre deals with and by the dedication of its wonderful staff and volunteers. I encourage all Members to visit a Headway centre in their constituency, and I want to make the House aware that it operates a free helpline, which is driven by nurses, that people can call for advice.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend commend the vocational rehabilitation provided to 10 of my constituents by Momentum Skills in Newcastle? The organisation asked me to pass on its massive support for the “Time for Change” report and its recommendations.
Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend has done a lot in this field herself. She has met with that group, which has been set up here in Parliament, and I hope that they will be taking part in our lobby in a couple of weeks. Next week is Brain Injury Awareness Week, which is why this is such a timely debate. Tomorrow, I am going with the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) to visit the National Star College outside Cheltenham, which does an awful lot of work.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning the damage that long-term exposure to carbon monoxide can have on the brain. He knows that I was one of those who organised the seatbelt legislation 25 years ago. One of the really worrying things that the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety found last week is that we are getting relaxed and that people are beginning not to wear seatbelts and not to put their children in vehicle restraints. If that continues, people are in terrible danger of serious brain injury or death.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One reason why carbon monoxide exposure matters so much to me is because it involves an element of social justice. Children from poorer backgrounds are four times as likely to have a significant brain injury before the age of five as those from wealthier backgrounds. We do not fully understand why as yet, and we need to do more work on that. However, it is also true that elderly people, who maybe cannot afford to have their boiler checked as often as others or may have landlords who do not check their boilers as often as necessary, may be suffering low levels of carbon monoxide poisoning over such a long period that they are not even aware that they are being poisoned. The memory loss, the fatigue and the problems they are having may be associated with their boiler rather than with anything else. We need to look further at legislation in that area.

The thing about brain injury is that it is often internal and completely unseen. It can add a whole new layer of stigma because people can often misjudge a sufferer standing in a queue in front of them or coming to work with them as being drunk. However, the reason why the person is slurring is because they have had a brain injury. That is why I and others—I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings—wanted to set up an all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury to look at the issue, which is a hidden epidemic. Every 90 seconds, someone in this country is admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury.

The APPG produced a report because we wanted to see more evidence. The Select Committee on Health produced a report in 2001, and some of its recommendations were implemented, but many were not. We wanted to go further, so we produced the “Time for Change” report, which calls for real investment in neuro-rehabilitation. We have major trauma centres that have saved so many lives—I pay tribute to the Government for the brave decision to take them forward—but it is depressing that a quarter of trauma centres still do not have neuro-rehabilitation consultant. That means that people sometimes fall between two stools when they leave the acute setting and go back to their home and to their community.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): A great friend of mine suffered a brain aneurism, and she may not have survived were it not for the Royal London Hospital and its support. My hon. Friend makes a good point about the need for that wider specialism in other hospitals and for transition support to provide much-needed rehabilitation.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If there is one thing that I have learnt from my experience of melanoma this year—incidentally, the thing on the back of my head is not a brain injury; I am still getting over the melanoma being cut out—it is that I, as the patient, wanted to go to the real expert, and I would travel as far as I needed to do that. Sometimes in politics it is easy to join the bandwagon when people say, “No, everything’s got to be intensely local,” but the decision on major trauma centres was a brave one taken by this Government. The Conservatives are not a party that I support, but it was the right decision for saving people’s lives. We can now save people’s quality of life as well.

The APPG also called for proper return-to-school plans for every child with acquired brain injury, training for teachers, prison officers and benefits assessors, and proper protocols shared across all sports for concussion in sport.

The effects of a brain injury can be profound. Some sufferers have severely impaired physical mobility, and there can be major behavioural challenges. I have heard of patients losing all sense of inhibition, suddenly becoming tactless, using crude and abusive language, divulging private information and becoming impulsive, irritable and aggressive; or, on the opposite side, completely passive, unresponsive and lacking initiative. Others become obsessive, repeatedly checking their possessions or becoming profoundly self-centred.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I have experienced some of the characteristics he mentions within my family—my auntie experienced a riding accident and my cousin experienced a motorcycle accident, and they both suffered brain shears. I also understand it from the experience of constituents.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, although trauma centres are very successful in trying to get the right expertise in the right place, they are required throughout the UK? Outreach is also required for subsequent rehabilitation, especially in rural constituencies such as mine.

Chris Bryant: That is one of the key points that everyone on the all-party group wanted to make. It is all very well saving someone’s life but, because we have seen so many miracles done by good neuro-rehabilitation in the community, we need to make sure it is available for people to live. Otherwise we are condemning people to a half-life existence when we could restore real quality of life—they might go back to work and be fully independent.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say it is a matter of getting social care to work with NHS and getting all the different organisations to work as a whole. That is why we hope that the Government—there are signs of this, but we would like to see more signs—will...
not work in silos of departmental and organisational thinking. We have to think across the whole, because this affects nearly every Government Department.

Many patients lose their executive functions, so they find it next to impossible to plan, make decisions, monitor what they are doing or control their emotions—that can make it difficult even to cook for themselves. In particular, a brain injury to the frontal lobes during the teenage years, when that part of the brain is still developing, can turn a charming, ambitious and able young person into an out-of-control youngster. All too often, if the brain injury is missed or misunderstood, they get into trouble, they are excluded from school and they fall into the criminal justice system. I read Edward Timpson’s report this week. It is an important piece of work, but it is a shame that it does not mention brain injury at any point. I will be writing to him about that to see whether it is another element that we need to address if we are to stop exclusions, which are currently so prevalent.

Even a minor brain injury can lead to headaches, dizziness, fatigue, depression, irritability and memory problems. Sometimes the effects last long after the injury, and sometimes they do not even appear until some time after the injury, which makes them particularly difficult to spot.

Partners and family members have a tough time, too. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) will know from his own family how complicated it is to make sure that people get the support they need. Loved ones have the terrible fear of the unknown. What is going on inside their loved one’s head? Will the anger and frustration they seem to be suffering get stronger, or will it ease off? How much will they be able to recover their former abilities and personality? And how hard will they have to struggle to get the support they need?

In too many instances, families and patients are being pushed from pillar to post when it comes to benefits. Listen to what happened to Jordan Bell, who had a motorcycle accident some six years ago, when he was 17. The accident left him in a coma for six weeks and in rehabilitation for six months before he went home. He had to learn to walk, talk, eat and socialise all over again. I am glad to say that he has made a remarkable recovery and is now a father, but he lives with significant, serious and completely unseeable impairments.

Jordan’s father describes dealing with the welfare system as “the most demoralising and depressing experience for us all.” This is a professional family. The initial application for personal independence payment took six months, with interventions from the family’s MP. David Bell writes:

“A year or so after our son’s condition had improved we contacted the relevant department to advise them that he was in our judgement no longer entitled to some elements of the PIP. We were ‘quietly’ advised not to inform them of the changes at all, but as we are honest people we felt duty bound to inform them of our son’s improvement. The advice given to us was correct: instead of adjusting the PIP in what would have been a sensible way the PIP was cut entirely. This then set in motion another six months of huge effort and stress and again the involvement of our MP. We eventually succeeded. But two years later it was reduced again to nothing.”

I cannot emphasise enough the stress this process puts on people with ABI.

One woman told me: “I know I should use all my energy to try and get my brain back together. But I end up spending all my energy on forms”—filling in forms and fighting bureaucracy. An unresponsive, intransigent welfare system is effectively preventing people from healing. I beg Ministers to take this issue seriously and to make sure that all PIP advisers are trained in the fluctuating and unseeable nature of brain injury. After all, one common feature is that patients become over-keen to please people. Often, they will tell the assessor everything they think the assessor wants to hear, because that is part of the condition.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Notwithstanding what I will say later, in casework I find that a surprisingly high number of disability living allowance claimants are having the mobility element carved away as they move to PIP, perhaps because, as the hon. Gentleman says, they have exaggerated their ability to get from A to B or to move into work.

Chris Bryant: That specific point has not been raised with me in relation to brain injury because it is one of the seeable bits. It is the unseeable bits that are particularly difficult for PIP assessors and other assessors to get right, which is why it is important that they all have proper experience and training in assessing brain injury.

I do not want to take too much time because I know that many others want to speak, but I will refer to a few more elements, the first of which is the prisons system. All the latest research shows that a very high percentage of inmates, both male and female, have had a brain injury. One survey shows that 47% of inmates at Leeds Prison have had an ABI, and Huw Williams’s work shows that more than 60% of prisoners at Exeter Prison have had a traumatic brain injury. In both surveys, the majority of injuries occurred before the prisoner’s first offence, suggesting that the brain injury may be a key factor in why they offended in the first place. If we really want to tackle their reoffending, we will have to deal with their brain injury, too.

Research at HMP Send and HMP Drake Hall also finds that the most common way for women inmates to acquire brain injuries is through domestic violence—45% of injuries. Again, we may be criminalising people who are actually victims. We need to get this right. If we really want to tackle reoffending, we must do a better job of recognising and treating brain injury. That means screening all new prisoners, training prison staff, providing proper neuro-rehabilitation for all prisoners with a brain injury and making special provision for women that recognises the likely different causes of their injury—particularly domestic violence.

I will not say much about education, because I know other hon. Members will. The Government have been good in responding to our report in detail, but the section of their response with which I am most dissatisfied is on education. There is a hidden problem across our schools estate, and we will store up problems for the future if we do not take this issue seriously. In particular, I urge the Government to reconsider our recommendation that acquired brain injury should be included in the special educational needs and disability code of practice.

The final area is sport. I make it clear that sport is good for people’s health, and I do not want to prevent anyone from taking part in sport. I do not want all our
Paula Sherriff: You don’t say.

Chris Bryant: All right. I am no expert, but I know about concussion in football. The last season has been especially bad. Mohamed Salah, Jan Vertonghen, David Ospina, Anthony Lopes and Fabian Schär have all been involved in high-profile, very dubious decisions by the on-pitch medics. UEFA rules since 2014 seem clear:

“In the event of suspected concussion, the referee stops the game to allow the injured player to be assessed by the team doctor. In principle this should take no more than three minutes, unless a serious incident requires the player to be treated on the field of play or immobilised on the field for immediate transfer to hospital”.

Honestly, three minutes is nowhere near enough to be able to judge whether somebody has suffered a concussion or any other kind of brain injury. Moreover, FIFA, UEFA and the Football Association have different definitions of concussion and, unlike rugby—where it is now standard that a player should be off the pitch for 10 minutes and can be replaced—football allows no subs for concussion, so all the incentive is to get the player back on and playing as fast as possible and in less than three minutes.

Let me be very clear to the football authorities. Football is failing its players. It is giving a terrible message to youngsters, parents and amateur coaches. Those authorities are putting players’ lives at risk. If they do not get their house in order, they will face massive class actions in the courts and we will have to legislate to protect players from what is, frankly, an industrial injury.

I want to end by talking about my own patch. I am delighted that south Wales will soon have a new major trauma centre at the University Hospital of Wales, but it would be cruel in the extreme to save people’s lives without ensuring that we can guarantee their quality of life. So we must make sure that when the centre opens there are proper neuro-rehabilitation services in Wales and that there is continuity of care once people leave hospital.

There is another issue for us in south Wales. In 2009, Kyle Beere was a typical healthy, intelligent, active 12-year-old—a bit too interested in fishing for my liking, but none the less. That November, he suffered a massive brain haemorrhage that left him fighting for his life. With no paediatric rehabilitation service in Wales, Kyle had to travel to Surrey for treatment. He is grateful for his treatment and his family is working all God’s hours to ensure that he gets all the support he needs. But I would dearly love there to be paediatric rehabilitation services in Wales.

Many medical miracles have been performed over the years, and I pay tribute to the doctors, nurses, scientists, pharmaceutical companies and staff who have constantly experimented and reviewed their work to see whether they can do more. I pay tribute to Chloe Hayward and everybody involved in the UK Acquired Brain Injury Forum. But we need a political miracle now.

The Health Committee produced a great report in 2001, but many of its recommendations have never been implemented. That cannot happen this time—please. We need a champion in Government to instil a real sense of urgency into dealing with brain injury: someone who can bring together all the different Departments and make them work together to deliver a quality of life that is more than just a collection of vital functions. I dearly hope that that champion will be speaking from the Dispatch Box in a few minutes.

1.12 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and to endorse and amplify his remarks about the Minister. Many people achieve office in this House, but few are more deserving of that opportunity than the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy). We are delighted to have her with us today. We will be even more delighted when she answers some of the questions posed by the hon. Member for Rhondda and gives us an assurance that the Government will continue—for they have begun well—to take this subject seriously and will act on the recommendations in this excellent report, which would not have happened without the initiative, enterprise and energy of the hon. Gentleman. His commitment has been exemplary.

The work of the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury is illustrative of this House doing what it does best: coming together, highlighting a subject, and bringing it to the attention of the wider world and of those who exercise power. We have, I believe, done a good job, but it is only the beginning of a journey. The destination we seek is our recommendations being enacted in full. Perhaps I am being a little ambitious, but at the very least the Government have taken a renewed and reinvigorated interest—I would not for a moment suggest that they were not interested already—in this subject, which affects so many people.

Perhaps that is the place to start. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the definition of brain injury, but I want to speak about the scale of the problem. The number of families affected by acquired brain injury, which, as the hon. Gentleman described, includes anything from traumatic events through to brain tumours, is immense. Hospital admissions for head injuries number 162,544—one every three minutes. ABI admissions have increased by 10% since 2005-06. Although men are 1.6 times more likely than women to be admitted for head injury, the incidence of female head injury has increased by 24% since 2005-06. Families across our nation and in all our constituencies are affected. The challenges are profound, and the reasons for the hon. Gentleman described.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I, too, welcome the report. May I add to my right hon. Friend’s list what I have discovered in my constituency? Even babies can acquire brain injuries from contracting meningitis, or during childbirth. I hope he will join me in encouraging the Government to consider that issue as well.

Sir John Hayes: I will—very much so. I have been terribly unlucky, by the way, having suffered a severe head injury as a result of a road traffic accident and, like the hon. Member for Rhondda, contracted bacterial meningitis. We both speak with some authority on this subject.

The patterns that those families endure are similar, one to another. Initially, of course, there is shock—a sense of disbelief—and the question that most people pose in these circumstances: “Why me?” Then there is a
gradual realisation of the depth and scale of the effects of acquired brain injury, and an unhappy initial concentration on what the person can no longer do, followed eventually by a reconcentration on what they can do. Most families follow that pattern when they suffer this kind of event, and that is why all that is done beyond the treatment of the initial trauma is so critically important.

Neuro-rehabilitation is vital because of the dynamic character of these conditions. Most people who acquire a brain injury will change. Many will recover fully and some will recover partly, but all that takes place over a long period and is particular to each case. There is an unpredictability about the effects of acquired brain injury; it can affect physical capacity of course, psychology and cerebral function, as well as personality. Families dealing with that must cope with those kinds of changes, which can be terribly frightening for the individuals concerned and those who love them. The point is that a difference can be made by the quality of care that they receive during that rather difficult journey.

When people leave hospital, invariably having been treated extremely well by our superb NHS, whether their subsequent treatment is effective is a matter of some uncertainty. It can be, and often is; indeed I pay tribute to the good work of Headway. I am a patron of Headway Cambridgeshire and have been for many years—and the other organisations that play a part in supporting families, spreading understanding and sharing good practice, but it is to some degree a lottery. It is partly about where someone lives and how effective the local agencies are; it is partly about how well Government Departments and local government work together and how meaningfully they address some of the challenges that are the inevitable consequences of these kinds of injuries. The all-party group’s report deals with them and the hon. Member for Rhondda highlighted some of them. There are educational effects and effects in the workplace and in socialisation; perhaps there is even the risk of criminality as a result of the consequences of a brain injury. It is the business of neuro-rehabilitation, which we emphasise so strongly in the report, that pleases the heart of what we believe the Government need to do to improve the outcomes for the people and families concerned.

When I was a Minister, which I was for a long time but not for long enough, many people in the House tell me—it is not for me to say, of course—I found that perhaps the greatest challenge Ministers face is in dealing with matters that cut across Departments. It has become almost routine to talk about Departments working in silos, but it is certainly true that the character of the vertical structure of the way we run Government and organise ministerial responsibilities makes it quite difficult for Departments to interact, or sometimes even to interface. On this subject, perhaps as much as on any subject that I know of, it is critical that Departments do just that. We speak in our report of the Departments concerned, and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) mentioned another, the Ministry of Defence. I urge the Government to continue to explore how we can take a cross-departmental approach. We have had strong support from the Cabinet Office, but I hope that the Minister will take that further forward.

Mr Sheerman: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about cross-departmental working. I am obsessively concerned with road deaths and road injuries; does he accept that getting the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Transport together to push for proper head and brain protection for cyclists, motorcyclists and people who drive cars is very difficult?

Sir John Hayes: Not for the first time, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Rhondda spoke of, for example, sports injuries. The response we have had from Departments has been mixed. It is certainly true that they have all responded, but it is fair to say that some have done so with greater enthusiasm and clarity than others. The convivial and collaborative nature of this debate forbids me from being more critical than that, but the Minister will want to look at those responses, as we have, and at how those Departments that have been rather slower to take their responsibilities seriously can be brought up to speed.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is right that cross-departmental working is vital. It is important that we also look at local government and
other Government agencies and organisations. Given the breadth of local government responsibilities, of which housing is a good example as well as education, which the hon. Member for Rhondda spoke about and which is critical to our report, it is really important that local government is involved in this work, too. It is therefore not only a lateral challenge but about connecting the local approach to the national one.

Furthermore, it is important that we recognise the dynamic character of individual needs. Governments are quite good at disabilities that are fixed. People have dreadful things happen to them and either acquire disabilities or perhaps start life with disabilities, and the Government can be quite effective and the national health service is highly effective in dealing with those kinds of challenges, but dynamic disabilities are different again, because of course by its nature that dynamism means changing needs and that requires changing provision. It might be in respect of benefits—the hon. Member for Rhondda mentioned support for benefits—or simply a matter of providing additional resource to an individual to allow them to get back to work or to return to education. It might be a matter of ensuring that the teachers, employers and others associated with an individual are well equipped with an understanding of what that dynamic disability might mean and might lead to. It is vital that the Government appreciate that many people have changing circumstances that require a changed approach.

Others wish to contribute, so I shall end by highlighting some of the things we said in the report and to which we would like the Government to respond. First, simply raising awareness is vital, and I hope that the report and this debate have done that. Secondly, I have spoken about neuro-rehabilitation and the need for a joined-up approach across Government. Thirdly, I wish to amplify an excellent point made by the hon. Member for Rhondda about education: it is really important that acquired brain injury is included in the special educational needs and disability code of practice. Fourthly, in the justice system, it is vital that all agencies that work with young people—including schools, psychologists, psychiatrists, general practitioners and youth offending teams—should ensure that the needs of the brain injured are individually and carefully assessed.

I could highlight many other things—our recommendations are broad, and I hope deep, too—but I shall end by quoting G. K. Chesterton, who said:

“How you think when you lose determines how long it will be until you win.”

When someone loses as a result of an acquired brain injury perhaps some cerebral function or the ability to mix and work with other people, or has some permanent disability, how long it is before they again see themselves as someone with a chance to win can be determined by what we here do, and on how the Government allocate their time, energy and resources to fight for, care for and campaign for people so affected.

1.30 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): First, I congratulate my dear friend the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on securing today’s debate.

Every year, an estimated 350,000 people are admitted to hospital in the UK as a direct result of an acquired brain injury; to put that figure into perspective, that is one person every 90 seconds. Whether that is due to illness, accident or some other form of trauma, the severity of that injury and consequently the rehabilitation they require varies considerably. For those with severe brain injuries, the long-term issues can be vast, affecting their personality, relationships and behaviour. It is quite obvious that early diagnosis and better access to timely and effective rehabilitation will greatly improve a patient’s chance of eventually regaining their independence, but it is essential that we also look at the wider long-term complications of acquired brain injury and particularly at the associated problems that patients face.

At a recent session of the all-party parliamentary group for gambling-related harm, I met George. Back in 2009, George was a typical 23-year-old young man with a bright future. He had a decent job, a supportive family and a strong network of friends. It was on a night out with those friends that his life changed forever. In an unprovoked attack outside the nightclub where he had been spending the evening, George was punched with such force that he suffered lasting trauma to the left side of his brain. After spending several weeks in a coma and months in hospital, George was left with significant psychological, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physical impairments.

As a result of the severity of his injuries and the complexity of his ongoing disabilities, George was eventually awarded significant compensation, but this only led him to further problems. A friend introduced George to online gambling, something he had no previous interest in, but he now had the time and the money. George very quickly became addicted, making frequent and significant deposits with a wide variety of online gambling platforms.

The result is that George has lost all his compensation, as well as money obtained by taking out additional loans and credit cards. At one point, he gambled and lost—this is breathtaking—£67,000 in just 40 minutes. He is now at least £15,000 in debt and, with no income, has no hope of meeting these liabilities.

George is not alone. Research has identified that brain injury survivors are 27% more likely to develop problem gambling or addiction than the general population, and that risk is found particularly among people with frontal lobe damage. Headway, the brain injury association, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, is doing a fantastic job supporting people like George, but it has highlighted that much more needs to be done within the gambling industry to protect these vulnerable individuals.

Survivors of a brain injury are prone to impulsive behaviour, lacking in reasoning skills and often socially isolated. Add to this in some cases the fact that they are suddenly in possession of a large sum of money that they are not necessarily capable of controlling independently, and it is not difficult to see how quickly and easily addiction can develop. The gambling industry needs to offer more and to work alongside brain injury specialists to provide support for individuals. The Gambling Commission has said it will be strengthening the requirements of licences to better identify customers and make self-exclusion schemes more effective, but this is not enough on its own.

Brain injury survivors such as George have already suffered so much, with their bright futures indefinitely stolen from them because of the trauma or illness they have experienced. They continue to suffer daily from the lasting effects of their injury as well as the associated anxiety and emotional difficulties. From an early stage
in George’s addiction, the gambling platforms were made aware of his vulnerability, but despite this knowledge they continued to allow him to gamble on their sites, robbing him of his much needed compensation, which was intended to give him a stress-free existence after his injury. Brain injury survivors are vulnerable, and at the moment the gambling industry appears to be exploiting that vulnerability.

It is not just about gambling. The consequences of brain injury affect so many people in so many ways, and we have to start looking more closely at this issue. We need better diagnosis, better care, and rehabilitation support, and I am very pleased to be a vice-chair of the APPG on acquired brain injury that my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda has established and chairs with such great passion, and I congratulate him.

1.35 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).

I note and welcome the valuable work of the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury, including its most recent report. I agree that Governments together need to lend their support and implement, where reasonably practicable and borne out by evidence, the measures that will bring about improved neuro-rehabilitation for those with acquired brain injury. About 1.4 million people in the UK are living with a brain injury. According to Headway Ayrshire and Arran, every 90 seconds someone in the UK is admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury, and in 2016-17 some 1,816 people with a diagnosis related to acquired brain injury were admitted to hospital from the Ayrshire and Arran area within which my constituency lies. These are large figures and very worrying statistics.

It has been acknowledged that more persons are surviving trauma to the brain, which may occur after birth or because of disease, an accident, sport, military service or a criminal act. Let me stop for a moment on the question of accidents. Having spent 31 years in the fire service and attended numerous needless road accidents, I commend those who created, invented and install airbags—we have no measure of the number of brain injuries that they have prevented—and the Governments who introduced the compulsory wearing of seatbelts and of crash helmets. The number of people saved from accidents by that is wonderful. I will leave this hanging for a moment, but would it be possible and worth considering the compulsory wearing of safety helmets for cyclists? I am sure that that would reduce brain trauma injuries in the future.

Those people’s survival is to be welcomed, although regrettably some could have a degree of disability and might have a different persona, which can prove difficult for all to cope with. The individual and their families undoubtedly need an informed and readily available bespoke support package. The onus is on us to enable these individuals to regain their dignity, which they so richly deserve, and to have an active role in our society, which is their society as well.

To date, rehabilitation provision for in-patients and those returning to the community appears to have been sadly lacking, or, when it is provided, of varying standards and not always in line with those narrated by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NHS England’s best practice tariff and the all-important person-centred rehabilitation prescriptions. Those prescriptions are so important to that individual, their family and their carers.

I support the desire for a specialist acquired brain injury rehabilitation consultant who would guide, oversee and co-ordinate matters. Oversight and co-ordination appear not to be as good as they could be. That is not to detract from the excellent work of charities mentioned in the Chamber this afternoon, such as Headway Ayrshire, which is part of Headway, the brain injury association, raising public awareness and working to improve life after brain injury by providing simple things like information on where people go for help. When someone puts their hand out for help, someone has to grasp it, and in many ways Headway does that, providing advice and support to the person, their family and their carers. Having previously sat on that charity’s local board, I have seen for myself how it is able to benefit my constituents and many throughout the UK in other branches of Headway. I thank Headway—its staff, volunteers and those who raise money for it—and welcome the contribution and support it gives individuals.

In 2017, the Scottish Government’s community justice funding enabled Supporting Offenders with Learning Difficulties, also known as SOLD. SOLD was able to assist those with alcohol-related and acquired brain injuries out of the dreadful cycle of reoffending. The prison community often does not understand these issues.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) made an incredibly important contribution— as my hon. Friend is doing—highlighting that many people become involved in alcohol, gambling or some other pursuit, which would never have happened had they not had their brain injury. The Government need to look at that aspect of the issue, because the consequences of brain injury can be as unpredictable as that.

Bill Grant: I thank my right hon. Friend for that welcome intervention. It is easy to identify someone with a physical injury—the leg in plaster or the arm in a sling—but an injury to the brain is not visible, and we need to be aware of that.

Scotland has seen the development of a brain injury e-learning resource, created under the umbrella of the Scottish Acquired Brain Injury Network, with funding and technical support provided by the national services division of the NHS. Glasgow University’s excellent Centre for Rehabilitation Engineering also undertakes work on the neuro-rehabilitation of hand and arm functions, neuropathic pain and the possibilities of retraining the central nervous system after spinal cord injury or a stroke. I should also mention a facility from which I benefited: the Douglas Grant rehabilitation centre, which is operated by NHS Ayrshire and Arran. The centre gives confidence back to people who have been subjected to brain injury or nervous system injury. It also gives them back their ability to find their own way in life, and great credit is due to the staff there.

As was mentioned earlier, the effect of sports injuries involving concussion is not quite fully understood, but it is better recognised, particularly in rugby, but such injuries can also happen in football. There has been
of effective neuro-rehabilitation and, sadly, sometimes to learn where such rehabilitation has not gone so well and people are struggling to cope. At the presentation of our report last year, we watched a very moving film showing people suffering from acquired brain injury describing their experiences. I found it a very moving experience that really brought home the difficulties that people can face.

The practical effects of acquired brain injury affect many areas of life, and our evidence sessions covered neuro-rehabilitation, education, criminal justice and sport-related concussion and touched on the welfare benefits system. The launch of “Time for Change” was well received, and was attended by Ministers, the shadow Secretary of State for Health and many other Members of Parliament. Most importantly, some of those who have acquired brain injury told us their personal stories. Our report made a number of recommendations in each area that we studied and, most importantly, called for Departments to work together to improve services and join things up. It was clear to us, as I am sure it will be to the House, that this is not just a health issue to be left to the Department of Health—although neuro-rehabilitation and physiotherapy, for example, are health services, are of huge importance in recovery and development—but one that needs to be joined up across other Departments.

If we are to make the real change that we have called for, we have to link up what happens in health with what happens at school, in the Department for Work and Pensions and in so many more Departments. Since the report was launched, there have been meetings with a number of Ministers, including the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, to name but two. The Government have now responded to our report, with the Department of Health pulling together responses to our recommendations from other Departments. I will refer to one of those Departments in particular—the Department for Education—and introduce a new area that was not covered in our report but that has been mentioned today.

It becomes clearer and clearer the more we look at it that acquired brain injury and its impact spread into so many different areas of everyday life, but I will focus on education and children. “Time for Change” called for some very specific measures. As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda, this condition affects many more people in disadvantaged areas than elsewhere, so it is really important that we get to grips with it. Our recommendations were fairly straightforward. Acquired brain injury should be included in the special educational needs and disability code of practice. All education professionals should have a minimum level of awareness and understanding about acquired brain injury and about the educational requirements of children and young people with this condition—for example, with the completion of a short online course for all school-based staff.

Additional training should be provided for the named lead professional who supports the individual with acquired brain injury and for special educational needs co-ordinators. We recommended that the acquired brain injury card for under-18s produced by the Child Brain Injury Trust should be promoted in all schools, hospitals and local education authorities. Many children and young people with acquired brain injury require individually tailored,
[Liz Twist] collaborative and integrated support for their return to school and throughout their education. As agreed return-to-school pathway is required—led and monitored by a named lead professional—to provide a consistent approach and support for the individual, their family and their teachers. An enhanced education campaign should be implemented in schools to improve awareness and understanding of sport-related concussion, with the support of Departments.

During filming for the launch of the report, I had the chance to talk to a young man from Scotland who had returned to school following an acquired brain injury and who told me about his experience of doing so. Simple things were not happening, like making sure that he had off-white paper because the white paper was far too bright for him to be able to take in. There was also the impact of noise affecting his concentration. They were all quite small things, in themselves, that were supposed to be planned for but actually did not happen. That brings it home to us that it is those small things that can make a big difference to children.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is making a really important point. There are two other areas where we could do more in exactly the same way. One of those is in prisons, where toning down some of the sounds and noises makes it much easier for those with brain injury, and the other is in our supermarkets. It is great that Morrisons, certainly in my patch, has an hour at the beginning of the day when the lights are a bit dimmer. It would good if all supermarkets had a similar sort of event.

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for those remarks; I most certainly agree. As I say, we just do not think about these things sometimes, and they can have such a huge impact in improving things for people with acquired brain injury.

I am afraid that the Government’s response in this area was rather disappointing. As in earlier answers to parliamentary questions, the Department for Education seemed just to restate the current responsibilities of schools and governors for SEND—special educational needs and disability. Our inquiry showed that there needs to be a greater understanding, very specifically, of both the presence of an acquired brain injury in young children and the practical steps needed to help staff to support these children with what is often a hidden disability. We also need greater co-ordination between health and education professionals to support children returning to school after a brain injury.

We have recently had much discussion in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall about the funding pressures on schools and the impact that that is having, particularly on special educational needs. We really have to bear that in mind. It is not enough to restate the law and the theory—the thinking—that behind special educational needs and education, health and care plans, and then leave it to staff and governors who are increasingly under pressure just to hold things together at school. I would have hoped for a more positive response in this area. I hope that Education Ministers will look at it again and address the need for more practical steps to ensure that pupils have what they need to develop and be supported at school.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady is making powerful points. The key is that these plans have greater specificity and quantification so that the development of the response to someone’s needs could be as particular as it needs to be. That means quantifying exactly what happens once the needs and the response to them are drawn up.

Liz Twist: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those comments. I most certainly agree that we need to have very specific proposals on how we can support people and to make sure that the support is actually put into place as well. As we know, there can sometimes be delays in achieving the ECHP, so I hope that more work can be put into that as well.

The Child Brain Injury Trust, which does excellent work in this area, has issued a call for action that includes some quite practical steps. It tells me that professionals across the field of acquired brain injury educational psychology are working hard to achieve the changes needed to support children in education following an acquired brain injury, but this requires all parties to listen and to implement the recommendations of the “Time for Change” report.

An acknowledgement of the support and interventions needed for paediatric acquired brain injury is required to limit the long-term societal costs and impact that this disability can have. Of course, it affects society as a whole, not just the individual. We want to give people the best chance in life, and that is why it is particularly appropriate to look at how we can support children who have an acquired brain injury. There needs to be improved training for newly qualified teachers—currently, acquired brain injury is not covered in that training—and a national campaign of recognition that acquired brain injury affects an additional 40,000 children and young people every year and has a significant impact on society.

The Child Brain Injury Trust says that acquired brain injury continues to be misdiagnosed and misunderstood, and our current system, and lack of knowledge and support, is letting down thousands of families. Funding is required for whole-family support. We need improved training for educators and youth justice teams, because over 60% of young people in custody report prior head injury. As other Members have mentioned, many young people affected by acquired brain injury are excluded from school due to their “inappropriate behaviour” and then go on to commit crime. Therefore, better knowledge of the condition and improved support has the potential to save society huge sums of money otherwise needed for youth justice.

The Child Brain Injury Trust calls for involvement and commitment from the Department for Education to support and fund some of these recommended initiatives. As I said, I hope that the Department for Education will take a more active part in looking after these young people and look again at its response to see how it can be improved.

The other area I want to touch on, which has already been mentioned by a number of Members, is acquired brain injury and carbon monoxide poisoning. This is not something that I had thought of myself. It shows, again, how many areas of our lives and our environment affect people and can cause acquired brain injury. I am a member not only of the APPG on acquired brain injury but the APPG on carbon monoxide, and earlier
this year we had a special roundtable meeting chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda. One of the difficulties is recognising when people are suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning, especially the impact that can have on the brain. The shortage of support is particularly difficult for people with an acquired brain injury caused by carbon monoxide poisoning, as they are less likely to receive specialist treatment if they experience low-level carbon monoxide exposure that results in more subtle neurological effects. To address this, the APPG on carbon monoxide recommends that NHS England develop a specialist clinic for people with long-term neurological effects caused by carbon monoxide exposure. This will help to plug the gap in care provision and enable future studies that will innovate treatment methods.

We must also remember that, as the Government said in their November 2018 health and social care policy paper, prevention is better than cure, and preventing carbon monoxide poisoning will also prevent some of these acquired brain injuries. The APPG recommends that the Government introduce preventive measures, including mandating carbon monoxide alarms in all tenures. I know that the Government are already looking at this in certain tenures, but it should be across all tenures. Carbon monoxide monitors should be provided for those in first-time pregnancy. We must tackle substandard housing that increases the risk of carbon monoxide exposure. We also recommend that Public Health England and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office do more to raise public awareness of carbon monoxide, to encourage risk-lowering behaviours at home and abroad. The special roundtable meeting that we had was very productive. We had a high number of medical people there who were recognising this problem that perhaps the rest of us had not recognised until now. We need some practical steps to improve that.

I have mentioned the Child Brain Injury Trust’s recommended actions, particularly on education. There is so much more that I could say, but much of it has already been said, so I will only mention a few things. We are seeing more people survive severe trauma, and we must give more effective support after they recover from their immediate injury, to help them develop their life.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I have personal experience of this through my brother, who unfortunately had a very severe accident, which left him brain-damaged. Owing to the determination of my parents and family, who took the time to care for and look after him, we were able to give him some sort of an independent life, which is very important. He is happy and safe with his carers, friends and family. Does the hon. Lady agree that more needs to be done to support the families of those with ABI, to give them hope that there can be more than a life—especially a life. We need to give people who have acquired brain injury a normal life, if at all possible.

Liz Twist: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I certainly agree that we must give more support to the carers and families of young people or adults with acquired brain injury, while allowing the person who is directly affected to have as full and good a life as they can.

I want to mention the “One Punch” campaign. We are becoming increasingly aware of the impact that one punch on a night out, perhaps after a lively evening, can have. It can be devastating, and I am glad to see campaigns around the country aiming to ensure people are aware of that. We have talked about how sports must keep up the level of support and awareness and, if in doubt, sit people out. That is really important. We have also heard about the huge impact on our prison community. We must develop a response to that, so that we can take account of acquired brain injury and how it affects people’s behaviour and development.

Headway has made some recommendations. It says: “Brain injury can happen to anyone, at any time. Living with the effects of a brain injury creates challenges in almost every area of life.”

That is so true. Headway is calling on Members of Parliament to recognise and support the needs of service users, families and carers, including greater understanding of the complexity and hidden effects of brain injury; wider recognition of the symptoms of brain injury; to ensure rapid and accurate diagnosis; access to timely, specialist rehabilitation and support services; an end to lengthy waits for social service assessments for support funding; changes to disability benefit assessments, which currently fail a large number of brain injury survivors and their families—Headway has a campaign called “Right First Time”—and more effective data gathering across the NHS, to provide clearer evidence of the needs of survivors, around diagnosis, acute care, longer-term rehabilitation and support to regain independence. Acquired brain injury is life changing, and we must do everything we can to support people across all spheres of life.

2.3 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I praise the remarkable work of the APPG on acquired brain injury for its dedication to this issue and for securing this particularly important debate. Research from Headway, the brain injury association, shows that every 90 seconds someone in the UK is admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury-related diagnosis. That is approximately 350,000 people a year. If this debate lasts for an hour and a half, another 60 people will have been struck by brain injury while we are in the Chamber. The majority of those people will need at least some form of short-term support or longer-term rehabilitation to help them rebuild their lives, re-learn lost skills and regain a degree of independence.

Excellent work is done in the charity sector to support people with acquired brain injury. I am sure that many colleagues across the House will want to join me in congratulating Headway on reaching its 40th anniversary this year. I am proud to say that the charity is based in my constituency and led by my friend and colleague, Peter McCabe, as chief executive. For four decades, it has been supporting brain injury survivors and their families and carers, to ensure that lives saved by significant advances in neurosurgery are lives worth living.

When a brain injury strikes, it is usually without warning. Put simply, it can happen to anyone, at any time. The support provided by Headway starts from the moment brain injury strikes and continues for as long
as it is needed. With the introduction of major trauma centres, the chances are that a patient with a significant brain injury will be quickly transferred to a unit that is better equipped to provide specialist emergency care. That can be many miles from the family home. I am sure we can all agree that, if a loved one were involved in an accident or suddenly became seriously ill, we would want to be at their bedside, but for some people—particularly in low-income families—that can be a challenge if the patient is transferred to a unit many miles away.

That is why I would like to raise the importance of the Headway emergency fund, which provides grants to families to ensure that they can be by the bedside of a loved one in a coma. To date, the charity has distributed more than £369,294 to 1,783 families across the UK. In addition, families can receive emotional and practical support to help them to cope with the overwhelming situation and to make sense of what is happening. They can also rely on the charity’s nurse-led helpline, which has seen an increase in demand of 131% over the last 10 years.

Given that there will be many people watching the debate who are working on this issue, I would like to raise the Headway brain injury identity card, which is endorsed by numerous agencies in the criminal justice system, including the Police Federation and the National Police Chiefs’ Council. The House has previously discussed the high prevalence of brain injury among the offender population. This new initiative from Headway is helping the police to identify brain injury survivors at the earliest opportunity, to ensure that they receive appropriate support.

We should all be proud of our national health service, particularly when it comes to emergency and acute care, but a life worth saving has to be a life worth living. Many of my hon. Friends here today will be aware of the excellent work being done by Headway groups and branches in their constituencies. Whether through rehabilitative therapies to improve speech and language skills or facilitate a return to work or education, or social interaction to prevent isolation, the work being done in our local communities by these groups and branches can be a lifeline to families affected by brain injury, helping people to rebuild their lives and become less dependent on costly state support.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I add briefly to that catalogue of virtues the fact that Headway has been reaching out to parliamentarians like ourselves? The reason I am here for this debate is that Jo Hillier of Southampton Headway got in touch with me and asked me to be here. That is why I am learning so much more about this condition than I would otherwise have had the possibility of knowing.

Siobhain McDonagh: That is my experience as well. Had Peter McCabe not called me, I might not be here, and I would know so much less about the volume of people who experience brain injury and the sort of problems they and their families and carers have.

We are very grateful for Headway’s intervention. However, Headway cannot do this alone. Local charities are under incredible pressure. Funding cuts are causing harm to the lives of some of society’s most vulnerable people, who are being cut out of society due to a lack of access to vital support services. For many people, Headway provides a route back to independent living, further education or employment. The reality is that, aside from Headway, most people—particularly those who cannot afford private healthcare—will receive insufficient support or rehabilitation after leaving hospital. Unless action is taken to enable people to access the vital support needed to ensure that these services survive, more and more people will be cut out of society and taxpayers will be left footing the bill for the longer-term care of those without the means to care for themselves.

Considering that another four people will have been struck by brain injury during my speech, there simply is no time to delay.

2.10 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for bringing forward this debate and I compliment all the speakers on their contributions. It would be churlish of me not to say a word of congratulation to the Minister on her appointment. It is a delight to see her in her place. I am going to give the House something of a personal account, which I will try to keep fairly brief. I hope that I can draw from that personal account a number of conclusions and suggestions.

Yesterday and today, several Members have remarked on the fact that this is the 20th anniversary of the foundation of the Scottish Parliament. In early 1999, I was canvassing in north-west Sutherland. I always start canvassing early, but don’t tell the SNP. I pulled up at a phone box at Inchnadamp—this was back in the days when we had phone boxes even in remote parts of the highlands—I tried to ring home and there was no reply. So I carried on. When I got home at 5 or 6 o’clock that night, I discovered that my wife was in hospital—at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness.

My wife had been due to drive to Inverness to get the messages, as we say in the highlands, but found—as it turned out, very luckily—that the car had a flat tyre, so she caught the bus to Inverness. Having got her home, she was at the bus stop waiting to come home again when she took a massive epileptic fit. She woke up in Raigmore Hospital. Very shortly afterwards, when the staff took an X-ray of her head, they discovered that she had an extremely large meningioma, which is a form of tumour. Luckily, it is a benign tumour, but they reach some size. Within weeks, she had an operation to remove the meningioma. Unfortunately, in the recovery ward shortly after her operation, she took a further brain haemorrhage and had to go straight back into surgery. She was then in intensive care, but she did survive. I want to say that, for my family, for me and for my dear wife, it was an incredibly difficult time. How my eldest daughter, who was then aged 17, got through her studying for her highers, I will never know. I always think that my three children were in fact braver than I was; I put that on the record.

I want to say something else for the sake of the record. Reference has been made to the NHS and just how good it is. The then consultant neurosurgeon at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, where my wife was operated on, was Mr David Currie. He and his team, as well as the nursing staff, were absolutely astonishing. I owe them and my wife owes them absolutely everything.
They may think it was churlish for me to carry on canvassing to be an MSP but, when my wife could speak, which was not for a few weeks, I said, “Look, it’s only March and the election isn’t until May, I think I’ll pull out”, and she said, “Don’t.” She said it very quietly—she could only speak very softly. She said, “You must carry on. I think you might win.” And so I did. So there is a happy end to the story.

My wife is left somewhat disabled—she has a weak left leg and she has lost the use of her left arm—but, as we always say in my family, she is alive. She remains better than I am at the crossword. I cannot tell hon. Members how annoying that is, but that is just the way it is. She suffers from mild anxiety about things; much comment has been made about the side effects of this sort of surgery. However, I am intensely grateful to the NHS.

There are one or two conclusions that I would draw in this short contribution. The first is that we could see that Mr David Currie, the consultant neurosurgeon, and his staff—I admit this was 20 years ago—were stretched. Mr Currie always said to my wife for some years afterwards, “You see these white hairs. I got these operating on you for the second time.” But they were pushed. They were working extremely hard, but we could see they were pushed.

Secondly, as I have said already, we could see the sheer importance of the NHS and what a great British institution that is. I think, rightly, all parties in this place cherish and nurture it. I have to say, as an aside, that when I hear some of the comments coming across the Atlantic from the United States about how they do not want anything like the NHS, I think that they are just plain dotty. It is something of which we are very proud.

A third point arises from this experience, which was difficult. I admit that it was 20 years ago but, when my wife came out of hospital and came home, there was the business about what occupational therapy and physio help she could get, what was the social work package and how that was going to be handled. I think things have improved since then—I give credit to the Scottish Government for that—but how this is put together is very traumatic for the patient and for the patient’s loved ones. I was 44 and my wife was 42, and we had a family in their teens. An event such as this is a crisis and a huge event. I was 44 and my wife was 42. There were four neurosurgical units in Scotland and Mr David Currie was the sole consultant neurosurgeon at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. Had the four units been put together as one, there would have been better peer working and peer support. I think the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) will recall.

I have a habit of talking about disability issues because of my wife. One of the reasons why I volunteered—I was probably completely insane—to go on the small Committee charged with building the Scottish Parliament was that I could see that the old temporary Parliament at the top of the Mound in Edinburgh was utterly unsuitable for disabled people. Because of my wife’s experience, I got involved in what was known as the Holyrood project. It damn nearly lost me my seat. It was that when I heard some of the comments coming across the Atlantic from the United States about how they do not want anything like the NHS, I think that they are just plain dotty. It is something of which we are very proud.

I have mentioned several times in this place the issue of getting disabled people back into work. At a time, whatever happens with Brexit, when we must play to all our strengths—we must play every card we hold—we have a lot of people who have been ill or are partially disabled who have great abilities that they could contribute to the functioning of the United Kingdom and to forging a new and better future for the United Kingdom. It remains a challenge for Governments of all colours to harness those people. If nothing else, it makes them feel that they are contributing to the country and it makes them feel useful and that they are important.

Self-esteem and the esteem of your peers is incredibly important to happiness and to quality of life.

I want to take up the point, which I think was made by the hon. Member for Rhondda, that notwithstanding the desirability of local delivery of services, there is something to be said for amalgamation when it comes to something as crucial as neurosurgery. At the time of my wife’s treatment, there were four neurosurgical units in Scotland and Mr David Currie was the sole consultant neurosurgeon at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. Had the four units been put together as one, there would have been better peer working and peer support. I think the hon. Gentleman made the point that, when it is something as traumatic as neurosurgery, people do not mind travelling. From the northern highlands, it did not really matter to me whether it was Aberdeen, Edinburgh or Glasgow—I just wanted my loved one to get the best possible treatment. I know it is always the case that we will get a local campaign saying, “No, no—not this”, but I think we can draw a line on some services, where centralisation for the maximisation of making people better is important. We should not lose sight of that.

A meningioma is a tumour that can kill you. It is a meningioma whether people live in Scotland, England or Wales—anywhere at all. I therefore appeal both to the Scottish Government and the UK Government for maximum co-ordination across borders on health delivery, the health service and making people better. I would hate to think that a line drawn by people on a map would in any way get in the way of that because this is about saving lives and making people better, which is surely one of the most important things.

I am going to end, as is my wont in this place, with a very short anecdote. I was lucky in May 1999. I would not say if they are sad enough, but if Members have a dull moment they can look at this week’s edition of *Holyrood* magazine and remark how young I looked then; I had aged terribly badly since then. I did win my seat. The *Times* decided to do a vox pop of my new constituents only a few days after I was elected. It asked one lady from the village of Kildary in Easter Ross, “How do you feel about Jamie Stone being elected to be an MSP for this constituency?” She replied, famously, “Well, at least it keeps him off the street.” When I read that to my wife in her hospital bed, she roared with laughter and I knew then that she was better.

2.19 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am delighted to take part in this important, wide-ranging, informative and consensual debate, and grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for securing and opening it. I thank the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury for its considered work, and the United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum for its report. The hon. Gentleman covered much of the ground in his opening remarks, which included a thorough summary of the subject. He reminded us that ABI affects nearly every Department and has a major impact on the families and support networks of those affected.
On behalf of my colleagues in the SNP, I welcome the publication of the report and congratulate the APPG on its amazing work. I encourage anyone who has not read the report to do so. The infographic on ABI key facts is an eye-opener; it informs us that 1.3 million people are living with traumatic brain injury-related disabilities, at an estimated annual cost of £15 billion. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) covered many other facts in that report. I recommend the report for that graphic alone, but the whole publication is fantastic and contains lots more information. Indeed, it may even underestimated the position, because much of the published information relates to traumatic brain injuries, not just to ABIs; none the less, it puts the scale of the problem in perspective.

We have heard a number of case studies today, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for his personal anecdotes, which helped to bring this subject home. I cannot help but think, “There but for fortune,” as such a thing could happen to any of us at any time.

I have suffered two head injuries in my lifetime, thankfully both fairly minor. Once I was hit by a golf ball—I was not even on a golf course at the time, which proves that such a thing can happen anywhere—and the other time was when as a child I was hit by a swing. I had listened to my mother who told me not to run in front of swings, but let me state for the record that it is easy to be run over by a swing. Thankfully, I was left without any lasting effects, but I know of constituents who suffered injuries that appeared to be no worse than mine. It is important to support the Scottish trauma network, which helps to bring this subject home. I cannot help but think, “There but for fortune,” as such a thing could happen to any of us at any time.

In Scotland we are committed to ensuring that those with disabilities such as ABI get the support and care they need to live as independently as possible. The report is a welcome addition to that debate. It brings together key findings in a range of sectors, looking specifically at the impact that an acquired head injury can have on a person’s interaction with many different services. ABI can be caused by a variety of events and have a wide range of implications. It is important that specific pathways are available to those who have suffered ABI and have had to go through the pain and trauma of coming to terms with the impact of that injury on their day-to-day lives. Fundamentally, this is about ensuring that people with disabilities can live as independently as possible. Our vision in Scotland is that children and adults with acquired brain injury should have equal access to highest quality brain injury care, regardless of where they live.

It is estimated that ABI is the most significant case of disablement for people of working age in Scotland. We know that around 40% of working age disabled adults are in employment, compared with more than 80% of those without a disability. Our key ambition is to reduce that gap. Many of those with ABI have complex rehabilitative needs.

Before I go on to mention some of the national services available in Scotland, I wish to pay tribute to some of the local work undertaken in my area by CRABIS, the West Lothian Community Rehabilitation and Brain Injury Service. CRABIS is funded by NHS Lothian and West Lothian Council, and it provides multi-disciplinary assessment and rehabilitation within the home or community settings—that is important—to those over 16 who have an acquired brain injury. The CRABIS team comprises occupational therapists, physiotherapists, clinical psychologists, speech and language therapists, and rehabilitation assistants. The model they use is being looked at by other areas within Scotland as good practice.

At national level, the Scottish Acquired Brain Injury Network—SABIN—was established in 2007 with the key objective of enabling improvements in and access to services in Scotland for children and adults with ABI. It comprises service user representatives, healthcare professionals, service providers and voluntary sector groups. SABIN published the traumatic brain injury in adults standards, which ensure a joined-up approach to immediate and long-term care for people with an acquired head injury. To achieve those aims, it works with partners to bring together healthcare professionals, service providers, parents, carers and voluntary sector groups who support brain-injured patients. SABIN undertakes events and workshops to raise awareness, including the Brain Detectives event for children who have a relative with a brain injury, which provides education on the effects of such injuries.

Last year, Scotland’s first major trauma centre opened at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. It will treat the most seriously injured patients in the north of Scotland, and is the first of four major trauma centres to open as part of Scotland’s trauma network, with further centres due to open in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee. A number of speakers have raised the point that in the case of such a traumatic event, people do not mind travelling—I certainly would not mind that should anything happen to me or one of my loved ones. The network will ensure that each year Scotland’s 6,000 seriously injured people get the best possible care and chances of recovery, wherever their location. The new centres will host dedicated trauma services, including rehabilitation support to help patients with significant injuries to recover more quickly. Backed by £15.2 million investment so far, the new Scottish trauma network will also include the Scottish Ambulance Service and existing trauma services.

I could, of course, touch on many other aspects, given the wide-ranging impact of ABI on services and public agencies, many of which—including education, the criminal justice system and health—are devolved in Scotland. I will therefore conclude with an issue that remains largely reserved: welfare benefits. The disability employment gap that I mentioned compounds the problems for those with ABI when interacting with that complex service. I echo the report’s call for less frequent reassessments and for assessors to be trained to understand the problems faced by those with ABI. I hope the Minister will cover that point when she sums up the debate.
the important work of Headway and the United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum, and I pay tribute to the excellent APPG for its sterling work to improve our understanding of the wide impact that ABI can have. Its comprehensive report, “Time for Change”, sets out a range of recommendations for the kind of support and rehabilitation that must be made available. I found that excellent report immensely interesting and informative, and I will now go on to champion awareness of acquired brain injury.

As the term suggests, acquired brain injury applies to injury caused to the brain after birth, and it can happen to anyone at any time. All Members have constituents who live with the consequences of ABI. A brain injury can happen in an instant, but its effects can be devastating and lead to lifelong challenges. The effects of ABI vary; those affected may suffer from headaches, dizziness, memory loss, extreme fatigue and depression, as well as diminished co-ordination and motor skills, irritability, and inability to concentrate. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings reminded us that we must be aware of the dynamic nature of the condition, and we heard about the wider impact of ABI when my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke about George’s experiences and the wide impact that ABI has across all walks of life.

Improvements in medical procedures and acute care have led to improved survival rates for those who acquire an injury to the brain. That is welcome, but it brings its own challenges and places further pressure on already overstretched health and social care services. Early and continued access to specialist rehabilitation has been shown to optimise the chances of recovery and to be extremely cost effective. As for many health conditions, however, the number of available beds across the UK is inadequate. Service provision is variable; consequently, long-term outcomes for brain injury survivors are compromised. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda powerfully reminded us, this is all about quality of life, and it is cruel to save lives without the following support and rehabilitation.

Many Members spoke of the scale of the problem, and many people—including me before this debate—have little awareness of ABI, even though the numbers affected are so great. Currently, 1.3 million people in the UK live with ABI, which has rightly been described as the invisible epidemic. Some 900,000 people attend A and E with a traumatic brain injury every year, and every 90 seconds someone is admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury.

It is estimated that 24% of children have some sort of brain injury, compared with 1% who have autism. ABI in children is often misdiagnosed as autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The point about misdiagnosis across the board was made effectively. A particularly good example was the misunderstanding of cases involving servicepeople. The combined cost of brain injury, including health and social care costs, disability support, lost work contributions and premature death, is estimated to be £15 billion a year, which equates to about 10% of the NHS budget. This is an issue of such seriousness and magnitude that it cannot and should not be ignored.

In September 2018, the APPG report called for reform is all areas and Departments. This is not just a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care, although that would be a good starting point. As the report so rightly demonstrates, this should be an issue for the Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions, too. The report recommends change in several key areas. A national review of neuro-rehabilitation is required to ensure that service provision is adequate and consistent throughout the UK. We have heard Members describe current provision as a lottery. All affected individuals should be given a rehabilitation prescription, and there should be a significant increase in the number of neuro-rehabilitation beds. We heard about excellent trauma centres, but would it not be wonderful if an ABI consultation could be available in each of those units?

On education, Members expressed disappointment that the Timpson report made no mention of this issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon talked about small details, such as adjusting lighting or the colour of paper, that could be embedded in education. That would require all education professionals to have a minimum level of awareness and understanding about ABI and the educational requirements of children and young people with the condition. It is essential that special educational needs co-ordinators are given special training and that it is embedded in all SEN provision.

It was shocking to hear about the record of football in this country, and that, as a football nation, we have so little regard for sports-sustained concussion injuries. There is much work to be done in that area. Sport, Government and professional clinical bodies must work collaboratively to improve health professionals’ knowledge of concussion management.

Criminal justice procedures, practices and processes need to be reformed to take into account the needs of individuals with ABI. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda made the powerful point that ABI could be at the root of some crime and that, in the instances of female victims of domestic violence, we may be punishing victims. An assessment carried out ahead of imprisonment and sentencing would be useful in getting to the root cause of the problem, and would hopefully prevent further crime and further custodial sentences.

All benefits assessors in the DWP should be trained to understand the problems that affect individuals with an ABI. The story of Jordan Bell and his experience of Concussion management. Government and professional clinical bodies must work collaboratively to improve health professionals’ knowledge of concussion management.

Much has been done to prevent ABI. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) talked about the benefits of seatbelts and airbags in reducing such damage. Comments were made about the considerable work of charities, but we cannot rely on charity to deliver on its own.

As this debate is being held under the aegis of the Department of Health and Social Care, may I ask the Minister, in the first instance, to focus on neuro-rehabilitation? NR can avoid or minimise disability and optimise recovery. Early access to NR is critical and that it is embedded in all SEN provision.

It was shocking to hear about the record of football in this country, and that, as a football nation, we have so little regard for sports-sustained concussion injuries. There is much work to be done in that area. Sport, Government and professional clinical bodies must work collaboratively to improve health professionals’ knowledge of concussion management.

Criminal justice procedures, practices and processes need to be reformed to take into account the needs of individuals with ABI. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda made the powerful point that ABI could be at the root of some crime and that, in the instances of female victims of domestic violence, we may be punishing victims. An assessment carried out ahead of imprisonment and sentencing would be useful in getting to the root cause of the problem, and would hopefully prevent further crime and further custodial sentences.

All benefits assessors in the DWP should be trained to understand the problems that affect individuals with an ABI. The story of Jordan Bell and his experience of Concussion management. Government and professional clinical bodies must work collaboratively to improve health professionals’ knowledge of concussion management.

Much has been done to prevent ABI. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) talked about the benefits of seatbelts and airbags in reducing such damage. Comments were made about the considerable work of charities, but we cannot rely on charity to deliver on its own.

As this debate is being held under the aegis of the Department of Health and Social Care, may I ask the Minister, in the first instance, to focus on neuro-rehabilitation? NR can avoid or minimise disability and optimise recovery. Early access to NR is critical and there is substantial evidence that demonstrates NR is both clinically effective and cost-effective. Outcomes for those affected would be significantly enhanced if every individual was given an NR prescription that specified the individual’s specific needs and a care pathway. Will the Government ensure that every individual with an acquired brain injury gets just that? Will the Minister commit to introduce a neuro-rehabilitation consultant
in every major trauma centre? The UK is facing a shortfall of 10,000 beds for neuro-rehabilitation services. Will the Minister commit to addressing that issue? Will she ensure that all health professionals in the community in primary care and secondary care are trained to recognise the symptoms of ABI?

We heard the powerful personal story from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), which reminds us all about the impact on the families of ABI sufferers. So many people find themselves in a frightening situation. They need structured and planned support that is assured wherever they live. Significant mention has been made of the great work Headway does, but, as I have said, addressing ABI cannot be left to the work of charities.

Will the Minister commit to work with her colleagues across Government Departments to implement the recommendations in the APPG’s report on education, justice and welfare? As the debate has shown, there is support for action in all parts of the House. The report’s recommendations cannot be ignored, but must be regarded as the beginning of a journey. In the words of the all-party group, it really is time for change.

2.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a real pleasure to respond to this excellent debate on behalf of the Government. I would like to begin by thanking the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for securing the debate. I commend him for the all the work he has undertaken as chair of the all-party group on acquired brain injury. He began by giving us a vivid description of the physical impact of brain injuries, and went on to describe a whole gamut of mental health and emotional effects they have on people—and, of course, their families. He set me a challenge and I shall endeavour to meet it.

My right hon. Friend, the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) spoke with his usual eloquence. He reminded us about the scale of ABI, and emphasised the complexity of the issue and how it touches on many areas. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) told us all about George, reminding us that ABI can have extremely unexpected and devastating effects on the people who live with it and their families.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), with his long career in the fire service, saw many people who had an ABI. He set us a very interesting challenge about having compulsory helmets for cyclists. I will take that point away and speak to my colleagues in the Department for Transport about it. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) outlined how people “just don’t get it”. That is a very important point, and it shows how important it is that we are debating ABI here today. She made a point about carbon monoxide poisoning, and I am due to have a meeting with the hon. Member for Rhondda on that very issue.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) told us that the excellent charity Headway, which was mentioned very many times during the debate, is based in her constituency. She reminded us that a brain injury can strike any of us at any time. We also heard from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). He spoke very movingly, as he did in the debate last year, about his wife’s experience and his. All I can say is keep going on the crossword.

Brain Injury Awareness Week is from 20 to 26 May. I welcome the time Parliament that has set aside to discuss this issue. Prevalence estimates for ABI are problematic to make, but it is likely that the number living with ABI is definitely over half a million and could be as high as 1 million. The total cost of brain injury in the UK is estimated to be at least £1 billion per year. Charitable organisations such as Headway and the UK Brain Injury Forum, as well as other local and national groups that hon. Members have referred to, are highly valued by those affected. They raise awareness and provide help to those with the condition, as well as to their families and carers, and I want to put on the record our appreciation for everything they do.

As we have heard, in 2018 the APPG held a wide-ranging inquiry into the causes, impact and treatment of ABI. My predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), to whom I pay tribute for the energy he brought to this matter, agreed to respond to that report, and my Department co-ordinated with officials across Whitehall to deliver that response on 19 February. In responding today, I will draw on key areas of the response to set out the relevant activity that is under way.

Sir John Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I know she will address these matters with her usual acumen and assiduity. I spoke about dynamic disability and the pace of recovery, but will she take into account the fact that aligned with that is the subtlety of the effects of brain injury? Sometimes a person may be deemed to have recovered completely and to have returned to normal—whatever normal is—but their manner, meter and mood might have changed and their sense of appropriateness might have altered, and that has effects in education and employment, in particular, as well as in personal relationships.

Seema Kennedy: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, showing that this is an issue not only for the health system and my Department but for others across Government.

While the majority of rehabilitation care is locally provided, NHS England commissions specialised services for patients with the most complex levels of need. For people who have ABI, neuro-rehabilitation that is timely and appropriate is an important part of their care. Access to high-quality rehabilitation improves outcomes for patients and can save money. The shadow Minister mentioned rehabilitation prescriptions. RPs reflect the assessment of the physical, functional, vocational, educational, cognitive, psychological and social rehabilitation needs of a patient and are an important element of rehabilitation care. The APPG report was clear that all patients with ABI should benefit from an RP.

NHS England’s major trauma service, where acute phase rehabilitation begins, sets out that patients should be reviewed by a rehabilitation consultant. The shadow
Minister asked about this. The development of major trauma centres, which the hon. Member for Rhondda supported, has improved recruitment to this specialty, while the national clinical audit of specialist rehabilitation recommended that all trauma networks review access to rehabilitation consultants and make improvements. Patients should have either a rehabilitation consultant or an alternative clinician with skills and competencies in rehabilitation to provide an initial formulation and plan to complete and perform the initial RP. At discharge, all patients should have a patient-held record of their clinical information and treatment plan from admission as they move to specialised or local rehab.

The “National Clinical Audit of Specialist Rehabilitation for Adults Patients with Complex Needs Following Major Injury”, published in 2016, found that on average 81% of patients had a record of a rehabilitation prescription. The audit recommended that MTCs take action to improve compliance. The audit report appears to have had a significant impact. The latest data, from the last quarter of 2018, from the trauma and audit research network shows that the national average rose to a 95% completion rate for RPs. This is good news. NHS England has worked with patients, clinicians and charities to improve the RP design and set new standards for communication and involvement of patients, families and carers. It is hoped that the new RP will support the development of a rehabilitation dashboard to monitor the performance of the system. Audits play an important role in helping services to improve. The report also recommended that all organisations within a trauma network work together to review capacity.

The majority of rehabilitation care is commissioned and managed locally. To support commissioners to plan services for local populations, NHS England has produced a document, “Principles and Expectations for Good Adult Rehabilitation”, that describes what good rehabilitation looks like. Additional guidance covering adults and children sets out a commissioning model and the evidence base for delivering high-quality rehabilitation services.

The hon. Member for Rhondda mentioned that ABI spans many Departments, and I shall take away all the comments that concern my ministerial colleagues and will ask them to respond. On support for children with ABI in school, the special educational needs and disabilities system is designed to support all children and young people with additional needs. The arrangements for SEND are intended to support joint working between health, social care and education; multi-professional assessment of a child or young person’s needs involving relevant experts; and the development of an individual education, health and care plan to meet those needs. This should provide a basis for the sharing of information and expertise to ensure the needs of children and young people with ABI are supported in school.

The hon. Member for Blaydon mentioned the ABI card. The Department for Education has said that promotion of the card is a matter for individual schools, but as far as my Department is concerned, Professor Chris Moran, a national trauma director, said that he would be happy to promote the card in trauma networks, working with the Brain Injury Trust. The statutory guidance on supporting children with medical conditions at school covers a range of areas, including the preparation and implementation of school policies for supporting pupils, the use of individual healthcare plans, consulting with parents, collaborative working with healthcare professionals and staff training. The Department for Education continues to work with organisations such as the Health Conditions in Schools Alliance to help to raise further awareness of the duty on schools.

On prisons, there is an increasing body of evidence linking ABI to offending behaviour. NHS England’s liaison and diversion service has collaborated with Headway to develop workshops to improve awareness and identification of ABI in vulnerable offenders and the support available. The “train the trainer” workshops were designed so that attendees could return to their services and cascade workshop learning to their colleagues. Representatives of all NHS England-commissioned liaison and diversion services attended. Over the past two years, the Ministry of Justice has also piloted approaches to improve screening and support for prisoners through new link worker roles at six sites on the male secure estate. I take the point about female offenders and will speak to the relevant Minister. There was a pilot at a female prison between 2016 and 2018, but I will take away the point about the female estate.

I want briefly to touch on the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Select Committee. The veterans trauma network delivers comprehensive medical care to veterans, including those suffering from brain tumours, and, as he knows, the Prime Minister opened the successor Defence Centre to Headley Court last year. We do not recognise his statistic that there are only two machines, but I will take that away and report back to him.

Dr Julian Lewis: I was not talking about tumours; I was talking about traumatic injury caused in explosions. My understanding is that only Nottingham and Aston Universities have the special types of scanners that can detect that particular injury. Will the Minister check that point and consider a screening programme for such people?

Seema Kennedy: I will happily take away that challenge from my right hon. Friend and will write to him.

The hon. Member for Rhondda spoke passionately about sport, although he claims not to be a sportsman. It is important that we do more to reduce the risk of ABI in sport. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport asked Baroness Grey-Thompson to carry out an independent review of the duty of care that sport owes to its participants; her report dedicated a chapter to safety, injury and medical issues. National governing bodies are responsible for the regulation of their sport and for ensuring that appropriate measures are in place to protect participants from harm. The DCMS expects everyone in the sports sector to think carefully about the recommendations in Baroness Grey-Thompson’s report and in the all-party group’s report. Progress has been made over the years, for example through the Rugby Football Union’s Headcase campaign and action by other groups.

It is important that the welfare system appropriately supports people with ABI. Work capability assessments for the employment and support allowance are conducted by healthcare professionals for the Centre for Health and Disability Assessments. Case discussions about
claimants with ABI form part of new entrant training for all healthcare professionals who undertake such assessments. They should all have access to a self-directed learning module on ABI, which was updated in 2018 and quality-assured by Headway.

Since September 2017, those who are placed in the ESA support group and the universal credit equivalent, who have the most severe and lifelong health conditions or disabilities and are unlikely ever to be able to move into work, will no longer be reassessed. Changes have been introduced so that existing claimants with the most severe lifetime disabilities whose functional ability has remained the same are more likely to have their evidence reviewed by a Department for Work and Pensions decision maker, and not need a face-to-face assessment with a healthcare professional.

I hope that this debate demonstrates how seriously the Government take the issue and the devastating impact that it can have on people’s lives. We are committed to ensuring that people are better protected. I look forward to responding to further debates.

2.50 pm

Chris Bryant: I will be very brief, because the next debate is also very important. I was delighted with the speeches of all hon. Members; my only complaint is that my constituency is not “Rhonda”, but Rhondda—if my hon. Friend that this country never had. As a young Andrew Marr

Death of John Smith: 25th Anniversary

2.52 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the 25th anniversary of the death of John Smith, former leader of the Labour Party.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting Chamber time for this special debate on a motion in my name and in the names of right hon. and hon. Friends across the House. The 25th anniversary of John Smith’s untimely passing is a fitting occasion to commemorate and remember a man who lit up this place, lit up our politics and lit up the lives of so many. I am sure that many hon. Members across the House will wish to share their stories and memories today.

This Sunday will mark the 25th anniversary of John Smith’s death. When I suggested this debate to his wife, Baroness Elizabeth Smith, I was not expecting a response from so many colleagues wanting to contribute or merely tell me their own stories about John. Many MPs, from all parties, have come up to me and said, “I can’t be at the debate, but let me tell you about the time...” or “I know where I was when I heard the news that John had died.” After 25 years, that is a measure of the man himself: he was admired and respected across the House.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Many of us have memories of John Smith. I remember that when I was a London taxi driver, there was a memorial service to him in Methodist Central Hall, just across Parliament Square. I could not finish the day without parking up and going inside to join in. He was a remarkable speaker—a magnificent orator, whom I managed to hear on several occasions. In my opinion, he will go down as one of the parliamentarians who can be described as a great Prime Minister that this country never had.

Ian Murray: I hope that when my hon. Friend went into the memorial service, he stopped his meter—I know that John, as a traditional Scot, might not have done so.

Some of the stories about John can be repeated in public, but—with his wonderful wit and Scottish humour—there are some that are perhaps best not written into *Hansard*. I do not think that anybody would contradict the assertion that he was the best Prime Minister that this country never had. As a young Andrew Marr wrote:

“The greatest political tribute to John Smith is the simplest one: had he lived, he would have become Prime Minister.”

It is no exaggeration to suggest that his passing changed the course of British history. He was referred to as “Labour’s lost leader”, the man who made the Labour party electable again.

As well as being a formidable and committed politician of extreme intellect, transparency, decency and straightforwardness, with a sense of fairness and a willingness to fight for those who were not able to speak up for themselves, John Smith was a committed family man, with his wife Elizabeth, whom he met at Glasgow University, and his three daughters, Sarah, Jane and Catherine. The country may have lost a Prime Minister in waiting, but they suffered the heaviest and most
heartbreaking loss of all—the loss of a husband, a father and a part of their lives that could never be replaced.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): When I heard of the death of John Smith, I was at the Scottish Tory conference—as a journalist, I should point out, not as a member of the Tory party. I remember that the whole conference came to a grinding halt. Everyone was stunned and greatly saddened. I thought that that reflected very well on John Smith, and, in fairness, extremely well on the Tory party.

Ian Murray: I shall come to that later in my speech. Journalists get all the best gigs, I am sure—such as the Tory party conference.

I was saying that John Smith’s family had suffered the most heartbreaking loss of all—the loss of a husband, a father and a part of their lives that could never be replaced. I feel that acutely, because I lost my own father at a young age. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing my own mum, Lena, a happy 70th birthday for yesterday. The Labour Party will want to join me in wishing my own mum, Lena, a happy 70th birthday for yesterday. The Labour Party

I never met John personally, but I feel, as others will surely feel today, that he was always part of my political life. His family still live in my constituency, and constituents often stop me in the street and get on to the topic of John. He was one of theirs, and they are not going to let people forget that any time soon. They all recall his

My right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) cannot be here today owing to a past into the church. The deep national shock was there by the black of mourners moving slowly and sombrely past into the church. The building sits on a small embankment close to where the building sits on a small embankment close to where

The building sits on a small embankment close to where John lived. The film footage shows the red brick punctuated by the black of mourners moving slowly and sombrely past into the church. The deep national shock was there for all to see.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) cannot be here today owing to a

25 years ago, the profound shock of John Smith’s untimely death was felt across the country and this House, which only convened for tributes to be paid, led by the then Prime Minister, John Major, before adjourning.

It was also the Scottish Conservative party’s annual conference” —as we have heard—and “Ian Lang, the Secretary of State, announced the news and adjourned the conference immediately.

In the Labour party and wider Labour movement the sorrow was profound. I recall a senior trade unionist telling me that he was listening to the tributes in his car, and found himself crying so much that he had to pull over and stop the car.

Party leaders, presidents and prime ministers from across Europe demanded to be allowed to come to the funeral and pay their respects. None were officially invited but they all came anyway at what ended up as almost a state funeral. Yet, in the end, it was not a sombre occasion—appropriately, because John was not a sombre man. It was his lifelong friend Donald Dewar who said in his address, ‘John could start a party in an empty room—and frequently did.’

Yet his outstanding characteristic was his determination to, as he put it, ‘speak up for those who can’t speak up for themselves.’

I do not really want to do a biography of John, but his character was undoubtedly shaped by his upbringing and early life. John was of radical Presbyterian stock, born on the west coast of Scotland on 13 September 1938. “John Smith”, he once said “is the commonest name in Scotland. A robust character is needed to overcome that.” His grandfather was a herring fisherman, and his father was the schoolmaster at the local village school.

At 14, John attended the grammar school at Dunoon. He was academically very successful and began to organise on behalf of his beloved Labour party. From school, he went to Glasgow University, where he cut his teeth, sharpened his elbows and honed the skills that would take him to the Bar and then to the Dispatch Box. He remained at university for seven years, reading for degrees first in history and then in law. He became a first-class debater, as many of the Glasgow university alumni at that time did, helping his university side win the Observer mace competition, but his greatest passion lay in politics.

At just 21, he was adopted as Labour candidate for East Fife, which he fought unsuccessfully, and, despite another couple of failed attempts, became the MP for North Lanarkshire in 1970. Legend has it that he won enough money on predicting the results of the 1966 general election in Scotland to be able to quit being a solicitor and train for the Bar; I am not sure whether that is true.

As a new MP in this House in 1970, it was said that he ruined his chances of early promotion by defying his Whip and voting for entry into the EEC in 1971: I certainly know what defying my party Whip on Europe feels like so can concur with that. He remained a staunch pro-European and internationalist his entire career. Breaking the Whip must have been difficult for John, because he was a party man and believed in discipline, which would prove to be useful in his later political career, but he also believed in the common market and working together, and history repeats itself all too often in this place.

John had a glittering parliamentary governmental career as a Minister in employment, trade and energy until the long 18 years of Labour in opposition. He was shadow Chancellor from 1987 until he became Leader of the Opposition, following the 1992 general election and the resignation of Lord Kinnock. Despite his glittering parliamentary career, John always put his constituents first. Mike Elrick, who worked for John, said that John always emphasised that he had constituents who needed him to fight their corner and he had no intention of letting them down.

The people who knew him best were the wonderful people who worked for him, such as David Ward who is here today. I asked David what it was like to work for him and he had story after story of what a pleasure it was. As almost every tribute has mentioned and will mention, he was a witty man, with a warmth and kindness. David tells a story, published in Mark Stuart’s book “John Smith: A Life”, that emphasises John’s devastating humour, which was used to deadly
effect in parliamentary debates. John was a brilliant debater capable of superb one-line put-downs to Conservative MPs brave enough to intervene on him. When John was on full song, he relished the chance to cut his opponents to size. Such was his fearsome reputation that it became obvious that Tory Whips were discouraging their MPs from interrupting him in debates. In response, Labour Back Benchers used to taunt the Tories to stand up.

John was spontaneously quick-witted but he also worked very hard at jokes prepared in advance. A great example is the “Neighbours” skewering of Nigel Lawson in this Chamber in June 1989, when Lawson was Chancellor, over the role of Margaret Thatcher’s economic adviser Sir Alan Walters. Lawson and Walters were at loggerheads over Tory policy on Europe—that sounds familiar—and that was causing huge friction between No. 10 and No. 11, which is also hugely familiar. In opening an Opposition debate, John sang a brief section from the theme tune from the television programme “Neighbours”, playing on these tensions; I am not going to sing it this afternoon. This hilarious mocking of the Chancellor culminated in John calling on him to go “before he was pushed”, and 24 hours later the Chancellor resigned.

David Ward said that they were working on the speech the day before the debate and, while John and David were drafting the text, another member of the team, Ann Barrett, was watching the BBC to make sure John got the lyrics to the theme tune right. After that, they seemingly rehearsed the theme song with everyone, singing along late into the evening. David said he was worried that anyone wandering past the leader’s office would have been forgiven for thinking everyone had gone stark raving mad.

But I wonder what John Smith would have made of today’s greatest issue, Brexit. Today is Europe Day, and he was a great internationalist. For one, he would not have gambled on calling a referendum and he would have challenged the constant downplaying of the importance of the UK as an integral member of the EU. What would John have thought of the Brexit shambles engulfing and paralysing our politics? Is it worth examining what he would have done, and David Ward looks at this in an article published in today’s New European. We know that John voted to go into the EU. He fundamentally believed that giving up some national sovereignty to gain some sovereignty back would allow a great degree of control over the international companies and the global issues of the future. Working together was the only way to solve the global problems.

And here is a greater lesson for Europe now: the way John Smith handled the tricky problem of Europe. Instead of a leader trying to force his opinion on the party—history may be repeating itself in the Labour party today—he asked the party to force its view on the leadership. There are important lessons to learn from his handling of the European issue during his all-too-brief tenure as Labour leader. The party could have been more as they should be.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate and for the way in which he is presenting his arguments in favour of John Smith. I should like to take him back to the way in which John Smith conducted himself in the Chamber. Although he was robust in his parliamentary style, he was always respectful. This reminds me of a conversation I had with Jimmy Gordon—now Lord Gordon—who said that it was because of the respect John Smith had for others that he had not come across one person with a bad word to say about him. Would the hon. Gentleman like to reflect on that?

Ian Murray: That was a super intervention. I think that that was the measure of the man himself. I am sure that, if we were all a bit more like John Smith, this place would be more pleasurable and our politics would be more as they should be.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend might not know that I used to work for John Smith, and I will be speaking about him in the debate later. John did not suffer fools gladly. If you crossed him in a bad way, if you let him down or if you did not come up to scratch, you got the hard word—and if he gave you the hard word, you deserved it.

Ian Murray: I am sure that my hon. Friend has no direct experience of that and that he has just been told about that approach taken by the former leader of the Labour party.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I think that I am the only one here on the Conservative Benches today who was here on the day that John died. I remember being in the Department of Social Security, where I was a Minister, and I remember how shocked everyone was. We learned quite quickly that he had passed away, before it could be publicly announced. I remember the shock among Labour friends as they began to appreciate what had happened, and I would like the hon. Gentleman to know that Conservative Members who were here felt exactly the same as our colleagues in the Labour party. In that spirit, I would say to him that, while he has painted a picture of a robust and quite partisan politician, I cannot personally remember being on the wrong side of one of John Smith’s tirades. That is probably because I was one of those who took the advice of the Whips and did not intervene on him. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that he was able to combine passion with courtesy, and that if there is anything that we are missing at the moment in the difficult debates we are having, it is the ability to combine our passion—whether for our party beliefs or for Europe—with the courtesy that this House and this country need? John Smith’s example should take us forward into the future.

Ian Murray: The right hon. Gentleman’s intervention speaks for itself. If the House will indulge me, I have not yet had the opportunity to say publicly that he was a member of the European Union, but John minimised internal dispute by taking the unprecedented step of allowing the parliamentary Labour Party, rather than the shadow Cabinet, to determine its policy on Maastricht ahead of crucial votes.
fantastic Minister in the Foreign Office. I sit on the Foreign Affairs Committee, and he was always courteous and straight with us. He was a super Minister, and I hope that he ends up back on the Front Bench as soon as possible.

John Smith’s self-confident approach won a clear majority among Labour MPs for ratification of the Maastricht treaty. Crucially, that left the Conservatives looking fatally divided and Labour clear in its support of a radical and progressive agenda for a reformed European Union that put jobs and people first. I just wish that we could have that approach today. I am in no doubt that he would be deeply saddened by Brexit, angered by the lies told during the referendum and dismayed by the Prime Minister’s approach. I think that today he would endorse exactly the position taken by his former deputy, my right hon. friend the Member for Derby South. She unequivocally and persuasively believes that any version of a Brexit deal passed by this place should be put to a confirmatory public vote. We all listened intently to her superbly argued speech in this House during the indicative vote process, and many would conclude that John Smith would have agreed with every word she spoke. That is where our politics is lost today. Smith’s politics were based on persuasion and taking people with him, by force of argument, to do what was in the national interest. I believe that our politics has lost that principle at the moment, as the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said.

Then there is John’s beloved Scotland. What would he make of it all today, as a passionate believer in devolution? It is 20 years this week since devolution was introduced. The Scottish Parliament is his legacy. John firmly believed that devolution was the settled will of the Scottish people, but that independence would be disastrous. He would see it as even more of a folly than leaving the European Union. John made his political name by being fully immersed in his time at the Cabinet Office to do devolution. Many thought that it was a poisoned chalice, but he came out of it incredibly well. In a touching twist of fate, the first sitting of the new Scottish Parliament took place on the fifth anniversary of his death in 1999. I wonder what John would think of what is happening in Scotland today, where his idea of devolution to make Scotland the best place it can be is what is happening in Scotland today, where his idea of devolution? It is 20 years this week since devolution was introduced. The Scottish Parliament is his legacy. John firmly believed that devolution was the settled will of the Scottish people, but that independence would be disastrous. He would see it as even more of a folly than leaving the European Union. John made his political name by being fully immersed in his time at the Cabinet Office to do devolution. Many thought that it was a poisoned chalice, but he came out of it incredibly well. In a touching twist of fate, the first sitting of the new Scottish Parliament took place on the fifth anniversary of his death in 1999. I wonder what John would think of what is happening in Scotland today, where his idea of devolution to make Scotland the best place it can be is.

Key to the devolution reform was, John believed, the education of our children. His grin would have become a familiar sight in general. We could be doing well with them in Scottish politics today.

As we commemorate the 25th anniversary of John Smith’s death, let us remember the words that have become his epitaph. The night before he died, he spoke at a European gala dinner in London. When he spoke these now immortal words, he did it from the heart and with his usual passion. They are something that I have always used to guide me in politics, and perhaps we should remind ourselves of them every day as we navigate our own paths in this place. These were the last words he said in public and some of the last words that many of his closest friends ever heard him say. As all our thoughts this weekend will be with Elizabeth, Sarah, Jane, Catherine, the wider family and his friends, we simply say:

“The opportunity to serve our country—that is all we ask.”

Sever honor. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): In commending the hon. Gentleman’s excellent speech, may I say for the sake of wider consumption and for those who pay attention to our proceedings here that the lack of hon. Members in the Chamber at this particular moment is absolutely no reflection on the way in which this debate is perceived by hon. Members in general?

Listening to the hon. Gentleman, I had a tear in my eye. I remember very well exactly where I was when I heard the news about John Smith. I can confirm what the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter
Ross (Jamie Stone) said about the Scottish Conservative party conference, which was immediately suspended on that day. Perhaps I am somewhat biased as a West of Scotland, Church of Scotland, Scots lawyer, albeit a Conservative, in my absolute respect and liking for John Smith. I had the opportunity to speak to him reasonably often, and I held him in the highest regard.

What the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) said about the lessons we can learn, 25 years on, from the way in which John Smith conducted his political life and political relationships is a very strong message indeed. I simply repeat that the fact there is not a very large number of Members here to reiterate that message does not mean it is not held in very great honour. The memory of John Smith in this place will go on and on.

3.16 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Thank you for your very moving words, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) for his magnificent tribute to John Smith.

I rise as a Scot, indeed a Scottish Conservative, to honour one of our finest countrymen. When John Smith died, this country lost a leader of integrity and a leader of faith. His socialism was strongly rooted in his Christian faith, and he proposed a politics that, in his words, could “replace cynicism with faith, despondency with expectation, despair with hope.”

This uplifting vision of political service—indeed, service to others—is rooted, is it not, in the principle of love, the greatest of all the godly virtues? It speaks to our day, and indeed to all the days we have faced or will face in this House, or wherever we may be.

The service of the best of our parliamentarians, and John Smith is certainly in that number, reminds us that we serve not to gratify our pride or vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion, but, in the words of the Speaker’s prayer that we have the privilege of hearing every sitting day:

“laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind”.

John Smith, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South said at the close of his tribute, sought and asked for the opportunity to serve our country, which is all he wanted. In truth, it should be all we want. He sought to serve, as many hon. and right hon. Members do, and the country is the poorer for his tragic and untimely loss.

John Major described John Smith from the Dispatch Box as

“an opponent, not an enemy” — [Official Report, 12 May 1994; Vol. 243, c. 430.]

—would that our politics reflected that spirit—and he paid tribute to his pragmatism and fair mindedness. John Smith knew that some things were more important than politics. The national interest and the interests of the people of our country always came first for him.

As has already been said, the legacy of John Smith is celebrated, and should be celebrated, in the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the devolution settlement. It is 20 years since the establishment of Holyrood, which is now a vital part of the daily political life of Scotland. It is accepted by all, including people like me who campaigned and voted against its establishment. I was on the wrong side then, but there is no zeal like that of a convert—and a convert I am.

As a Scot and a Unionist, I feel that we must work hard to ensure that the Scottish Parliament fulfils its promise of a Scotland at ease with itself, united together and well governed, with a Parliament that makes a real difference to the quality of the lives of its people. But I have to say that I believe there is unfinished business in relation to devolution. In my mind, that is captured in my experience as a newly elected Member of Parliament for a Scottish constituency when I have come up against the culture and mindset of Whitehall.

The better governance of Scotland, I believe, will also require further change at the heart of the UK governmental system. There are yet missing constitutional pieces that undermine and have the potential to damage fatally the unity of the United Kingdom. I regret to say that, too often in Government Departments, there is a prevailing culture of “devolve and forget”. For the Union to flourish, its influence must continue to be felt as a power for good in the lives of people in all parts of the United Kingdom. John Smith knew that only too well, as a Scot who understood that the United Kingdom is at its best when it pulls together in the same direction and when people work together for everyone’s benefit.

John Smith’s resting place is on Iona, where the light of Christianity first came to Scotland. It is a fitting place. On his gravestone are engraved these words:

“An Honest Man’s The Noblest Work of God”.

That is truly fitting. John Smith’s politics were honourable and honest.

There is much we can learn from John Smith’s life and legacy—from a man seen as an opponent and not an enemy; a man who could see beyond politics towards a higher goal of a better country and a better world; a man who strove to give a voice in this place and elsewhere to those who are voiceless. I am only too well aware that in this House we stand on the shoulders of giants. Those who came before us are always with us, and always will be.

3.23 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate today. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing it and on his wonderful opening speech. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr).

I did not work for John Smith for a huge length of time—for about a year before he died. One of the truisms of life is that we do not know what we have until it has gone. Many people felt that about John Smith after he died. I remember well the tributes paid in this Chamber by MPs from both sides on that day and how moving and genuine they were.

It could be said that the podium at our conference or an outside event was not John’s natural habitat, but this Chamber was—particularly when he was at the Dispatch Box, holding forth in debate. He enjoyed it, the challenge and the back-and-forth. He loved to take interventions, like notes in a song to guide the rhythm of his speech. He would challenge the opposition. Having a master of
parliamentary debate at the Dispatch Box cheers the troops. It gave heart to the MPs sitting behind John to see him perform. He came up with some memorable lines: I remember him giving John Major a very hard time when things were going wrong—the grand national had failed to start, hotels were falling into the sea, and he called him:


For all the barbs, there was always a glint in John’s eye as he faced the person opposite.

John’s funeral was at Cluny parish church, and I had some part in organising it. It was a combination: it was a private family occasion but it turned into something like a state funeral. We all remember the words of his lifelong ally, Donald Dewar, who said:

“The people know that they have lost a friend”.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): My right hon. Friend may recall that one thing that happened at that funeral and that was subsequently replicated for Princess Diana’s funeral was that the service was broadcast to nine cathedrals throughout the country. People turned up in their thousands at all those different cathedrals to attend and sing the hymns at the same time.

Mr McFadden: That is an eloquent reminder of how deeply John Smith’s death was felt in the country.

A debate such as this is also a moment to consider what John Smith stood for and what he would make of today. When we think about what he stood for, we think of words such as decency and community, which for him was not just a word but something with real meaning—the basic building block of the good society—and we think about the term social justice. One of his main initiatives as Labour leader was to establish the Commission on Social Justice, chaired by Sir Gordon Borrie and staffed by a bright young man called David Miliband. That body was charged with coming up with a platform of ideas that would challenge poverty and inequality, promote social justice and opportunity and, crucially, do so with policies that were properly costed and not dependent on some mythical magic money tree. Responsibility was written through its remit, as well as ambition.

The reason why responsibility was so important was that John understood the importance of trust in politics—of winning the public’s trust—and the truth is that in the end, he did. It was not a battle that he always relished, but it was one he was determined to win, and in the end, he did.

John was a passionate supporter of devolution. He believed that there should be a Scottish Parliament and he never believed that that should mean breaking up the United Kingdom. His belief in devolution sat alongside a belief that we have far more in common throughout the United Kingdom than anything that sets us apart.

John was an internationalist, a passionate pro-European who broke the party Whip to bring the United Kingdom into the European Community within months of being elected as a young and no doubt ambitious MP. The reason he was so passionately in favour of that was fired by social justice: he understood that in a world of international capital, there was a social justice benefit to be gained by controlling markets internationally, and that no country could do that on its own. He would have been very clear in his rejection today of the right-wing nationalism that has driven the Brexit agenda, but he would have been just as clear in his rejection of the ossified fantasy of socialism in one country that drives support for Brexit in some corners of the left, too.

John was a believer in strong defence, a supporter of the nuclear deterrent and a supporter of NATO. He understood the post-war Labour Government’s achievement in creating a system of collective defence. He would never have found himself parroting the lines of the country’s enemies or attacking NATO as an aggressive or expansionist organisation. That was his politics. That was his democratic socialism. The tradition that he represented was the internationalist social democratic tradition in the Labour party. Of course, those were different times. It was just after the end of the cold war, and South Africa was emerging from apartheid. There was a middle east peace process that people could really believe in, about which he was passionate.

I believe that the causes that called John Smith are still relevant today: the battle for social justice, the battle against poverty and inequality, the battle for community to mean something, the battle for the United Kingdom’s European identity, and the battle for strong defence and keeping people secure—for collective security.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is of course a pleasure to speak in this debate on Europe Day about my dear old friend John, and I say that with humility. David Ward, his special adviser, is here, and one of the Deputy Speakers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), knew John well. Many of us worked with him, and you could not work with him without saying that you loved him. I knew him from about 1979, so for about 15 years. We were always in opposition; it is terrible that John never got that chance to be Prime Minister. When I got in, what I realised about this man who had asked me to join his team was what a rumbustious character he was.

I did not know anything about Scottish politics, and when I joined his team I suddenly realised that there were all sorts of internal wars in Scotland that I did not know about. I soon worked out who John loved, loathed and disagreed with, and it seemed that it all went back to time immemorial—or at least to their student debating days. I mean, it was no secret. Look at the quality of the speakers in those days, when I was first in the House: Robin Cook, Donald Dewar and John. I will not go into too much detail, but I will say that there was a very close friendship between Donald Dewar and John Smith, although the same could not be said about his relationship with Robin Cook, which was very deep in some student disagreement they had had in the past.

John was a rumbustious character. He was larger than life and an amazingly vibrant speaker. I remember the day we were in here and the Conservative Government were near collapse. It was Black Wednesday—we had come out of the exchange rate mechanism—and he filleted the Chancellor of Exchequer. He did him over in a way that only a brilliant speaker can do.

I used to be a university teacher when I worked for a living. Some university teachers who come here were probably very good lecturers, but cannot speak in the House. Their skills are about the courtroom, but they cannot do it in here. John Smith could do it in here—absolutely forensically and funnily. In a sense, it reminded me of Harold Wilson's reputation. John actually turned down Wilson's first offer of a job, which was unheard of. Wilson offered him a job in the Scottish Office, but he refused because he did not want to be branded just as a Scottish politician. Of course, Wilson was wonderful at interjections; he loved them. Whether in a public meeting or in the House, everybody knew that in his prime he was brilliant at repartee. John was even better—absolutely brilliant. As the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said, people were told not to intervene on him because it was like offering human sacrifice in a debate. It was a rollercoaster working for John because he lived well and loved to party, but his work rate was enormous.

Mr Sheerman: I certainly do not disagree with that. He seemed to operate brilliantly at every level. He had the common touch. When we took people in to see him, he always knew how to communicate with them, whatever their background. As I said in an intervention, he would sometimes give people a steely look. When he first met me, he said, “I don't know what to make of you. You're MP for Huddersfield, but you don't have a Yorkshire accent. I don't know where you're from,” which was quite perceptive of him. But we worked well together.

John was looking at new ideas all the time. He and Giles Radice asked me to be, I think, the very first person to work in the Department for Education on the employment side, so that we could develop a proper youth policy that covered not just conventional education, but training, job opportunities and so much else. I am a Co-operative Member of Parliament, and John was deeply interested in co-operatives. The interest in the Co-operative Development Agency and all that was down to him. He was passionate about it, and chaired the international co-operative movement for some time. Whatever he looked at, he had the passion and ability to push on.

John was also what we always need in this Labour movement of ours—a talent spotter. I remember when he had been at the Beaconsfield by-election, he came bustling back into the Commons and said, “It was a hard day and we're never going to win Beaconsfield, but there's a brilliant new candidate there—Tony Blair, his name is. I think we've got to get him a safe seat somewhere.” He was a talent spotter, even in terms of seeing new Members of Parliament coming in, identifying their skills and giving them a hand.

He was a bruiser, absolutely—you should not cross him. If you crossed him, politically or personally, he did not forget easily. When we had an attempt by Militant—a left-wing Trotskyist group—to take over the Labour party, he led the fightback, with Roy Hattersley, Gerald Kaufman and other giants of the Labour party who identified the problem and formed a new group called Solidarity. I think that our Chief Whip would probably have painful memories of the battles of those days. When that triumvirate said, “We're not going to take this,” John Smith was central to the fight to keep the Labour party as a central, democratic socialist party. We all owe him for the fact that he did that.

I think there was a bit of a myth after John died that he was almost a saint. John Smith was not a saint, I can tell you. He was not a bad man, and he loved life. He and Elizabeth were a great host and hostess at a party. We would never forget the lovely feeling of inclusion that the Smiths gave whenever they entertained.
When John become ill—when he had his heart attack—many of us were absolutely terrified. We were really, really concerned. We knew that we had to support him. There was a sort of little mafia. We used to co-ordinate to make sure that he got home at a reasonable time—that he did not stay in the House precincts too late and got his taxi back to the Barbican, where he lived on the 35th floor. I took on something of a role, because he lived in No. 352 and I lived in No. 92. Gwyneth Dunwoody lived in No. 112, so there was a kind of political and parliamentary presence. It was sometimes a very good excuse for me to say to John, “I’m going home—shall we share a cab?”, which we sometimes did.

Sadly, I was in my flat in the Barbican on that dreadful morning when someone rang me from John’s flat and said that he had collapsed in the shower. By the time I got out into the reception area, John was being brought out on a stretcher, very ill indeed. It was a very sad moment. I had a feeling of lost, missed opportunity for this person who had such a range of talents, passion and moral purpose. He wanted to change the world for this person who had such a range of talents, passion and moral purpose. He wanted to change the world for the better—and to do it now. He was intolerant of waiting too long before the changes in low pay and the minimum wage—all those things—could be achieved.

I remember John fondly and dearly. I hope we can keep that spirit alive. He was not a saint, but a passionate, moral man who wanted to make change. He also wanted to have good politics—yes, to have a good fight and really scupper someone in this place, but to go outside and have a civilised relationship afterwards.

The quality of John’s life and the sort of environment he engendered was something all of us can learn from. I have never spoken on any occasion about John Smith. I loved him dearly. He had a huge influence on my life, and for Elizabeth and his daughters we should say today how much we appreciated what he did in touching our lives.

3.44 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful and honoured to be called to speak briefly in this debate to pay tribute to John Smith. I am pleased to follow the very personal testimonial of my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

We have heard some moving speeches, but we have also heard about John’s humour. In case colleagues have not seen it, there is a great compilation of clips on Twitter of John Smith at the Dispatch Box tearing the Tory Front Bench apart. I mean no disrespect to the present Tory Front Bench, but it is so funny that even Lord Heseltine is laughing, and he is the butt of most of the jokes, which shows that it is really worth watching. It was posted by David Ward, and I have retweeted it, so colleagues can find it easily.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for affording this time, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing the debate and on his excellent speech. I did not know John very well. I was chair of the London Labour party for nearly 10 years, from 1988 until 1997, and I only met him on a few occasions. Neil—now Lord—Kinnock saved the Labour party from the hard left and turned around our fortunes, making us a serious party again. John Smith, as leader after Neil, consolidated that process and set us on course to win the 1997 general election.

In the 1980s, the capital was not a happy place for our party. The Sun branded us the “Labour loony left” or, more precisely, the “London Labour loony left”. But through the support of the national leadership and the great efforts of professional staff like Terry Ashton, Margaret—now Baroness—McDonagh, David Evans and David Wilkinson, and hundreds and thousands of councillors, activists and volunteers, London became Labour heartland again. John Smith drove that progress, and one of his first regional visits on becoming leader was to London, which was not always a popular place for Labour leaders to visit in those days.

John’s belief in Europe is chronicled in today’s New European by his former head of policy from 1988 to 1994, David Ward, who is here listening to the debate. David has supplied me with a reminder of John’s legacy, some of which has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South and others. The John Smith Trust runs the fellowship programme, which promotes good governance. It is very positive to see that the Foreign Office is funding the trust, which I hope will continue.

One spin-off from the trust is EASST—the Eastern Alliance for Safe and Sustainable Transport—which was founded by Emma MacLennan and other trust alumni. Emma, who is married to David Ward, was Labour’s social security and taxation policy officer during John Smith’s time as shadow Chancellor and leader. EASST promotes road safety in former Soviet countries and saves lives there. More recently, John’s legacy includes the John Smith Centre at Glasgow University, promoting leadership in public service. Kezia Dugdale has just been appointed its first director, and I wish her well. Both those important programmes keep alive John’s strong commitment to democracy and public service.

As we have heard, some of John’s policy legacies were the national minimum wage, which he strongly supported as both shadow Chancellor and leader; constitutional reform and devolution, including on freedom of information, the Ministry of Justice and Assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; and internal party reforms, including one member, one vote and electoral college revisions, as mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), a fellow Holyrood boy from Glasgow.

John was known for his commitment to social justice, and his strongest belief was that social justice and economic efficiency went hand in hand, hence the Commission on Social Justice. I am told he believed that party politics was like an aeroplane—you need a wing on the left and a wing on the right, and if you don’t have two wings, the beast won’t fly. Sometimes we forget that in modern party politics, in both the main parties.

John Smith’s incredible wit and debating skills in the Chamber led him to being credited, as we have heard, with provoking the resignations of Leon Brittan over Westland and of Nigel Lawson over Sir Alan Walters, Mrs Thatcher’s economic adviser.

On “Desert Island Discs”, John’s luxury item was a case of champagne. He told Sue Lawley that when he had drunk it, he would send a message in a bottle asking for more champagne. He was tickled to receive correspondence from a member of the public rebuking him for being so stupid for not knowing that you cannot put corks back into champagne bottles. Apparently, he loved that letter.
I would like to conclude, like my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South, by quoting from John Smith’s last leader’s speech to the Brighton Labour conference of 1993. This passage is perhaps a little more tribal than my hon. Friend’s, but this is a measure of the time and of his incisiveness. John said:

“Today I offer the British people a better way and a clear choice: a choice between Labour’s high skill, high tech, high wage economy, and John Major’s dead-beat, sweatshop, bargain basement Britain; a choice between Labour’s opportunity society which invests, which educates and which cares, and the sad reality of neglect, division, and rising crime that is Tory Britain today; a choice between Labour’s commitment to democratic renewal, rights, and citizenship, and John Major’s centralised, secretive and shabby Government.”

In conclusion, we were robbed of a great Prime Minister. Britain would be a different place today if John Smith had been given the opportunity to serve and to lead our country. It is 25 years on, and I sincerely thank my hon. Friend and his supporters for giving the House the opportunity today to remember John and to pay a fitting tribute.

The key lessons from John Smith’s political tradition and his political behaviour are that he was suspicious of fictional demagoguery and of opportunist political spivs who crafted their values in managerialist speak. However, he was also very intolerant of his party being in impotent opposition. He yearned for Labour to return to government, and that was evident in his speeches and the way he addressed this House. In truth, he was a complex mixture of different things that influenced him as a person. There was the ruthless Glasgow University debater, which is a great tradition; the Edinburgh lawyer, which is another great tradition; and the emotional west highlander. He came from a very beautiful part of the world.

In Tam Dalyell’s obituary, there is a reference to Calum MacDonald who was Member of Parliament for the Western Isles at the time of John Smith’s death. He observed:

“That John Smith was a West Coast Highlander by birth and background came across strongly in three ways. First, that socialism for John was not about dry theories on narrow sectional interests, but about values, principles, and moral beliefs. Second was his great democratic and egalitarian quality—that he could relax with absolute ease in any circle of people. And third, the sense he gave of being a man with a healthy ‘hinterland’—a man with a passion for politics but also with strong roots in his family, in Scottish society, and the land that he came from.”

John Smith’s presence was often felt. I went to Glasgow University, and one of the first things I did was join its union. Anyone who joins Glasgow University union cannot miss John Smith, because he is there facing every student who walks into that building as a wonderful bronze bust that stares from the top of the stairs of the debating chamber. It simply says on it “Friend of the Union”. That is what encapsulated the spirit of John Smith.

Working-class people often go to Glasgow University, which is quite unusual in Britain because most of its students are home students and tend to come from the city. It has a fine working-class tradition, and because of that debating chamber where—like so many politicians from across Scotland—John Smith cut his teeth, he came to this House without fearing it and with a healthy understanding of how it works. Working-class people who went into politics cut their teeth at the Glasgow University union, which to this day is the greatest debating union in the world. John Smith did a great deal to achieve that. He won the Observer mace for the union in 1962 and was convener of debates. He formed that great tradition along with Donald Dewar.

My maths teacher at school, Mrs McKee, used to tell me about going to see John and Donald who were a great double act in the chamber of Glasgow University. She recounted a particularly memorable occasion in November 1963, when the debate had to be suspended because someone burst in and said that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. It is interesting how those great swathes of history can touch each other in such ways, and perhaps the great figures of that period influenced John’s politics, just as he in turn influenced us. That is the great thing about institutions such as university unions. They build a great community, and even though I never knew John and he died when I was a small child, I still sensed the golden thread that runs through those institutions and inspires those who come after. That is a real sense of immortality. A person dies once when they physically die, but they would die a second time if their memory was lost, and keeping that memory and understanding alive is critical.
Until recent years, the university union held a biannual dinner and debate in honour of John Smith, and I remember that Tom Clarke, the predecessor of my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), came to speak to us. He spoke movingly about John being such a lovely man and someone who did not suffer fools gladly. He was also a great friend to people across political traditions and divides. He was not sectarian or petty. He was certainly tribal and firm in his beliefs, but he maintained friendships despite that. We should remember that important point in our current politics.

After his election in 1970, John did not necessarily pursue those things that would lead to progression in the political hierarchy, and in 1971, he voted, along with 68 Labour colleagues, against the Whip on joining the common market. He told the Commons that day that “economic forces must somehow be brought under popular control and be fashioned towards social and political ends that the people determine”—[Official Report, 26 July 1971; Vol. 822, c. 131.] We should remember that fine sentiment today as we consider our future relationship with the rest of the world.

In 1974, when Labour was on the cusp of coming into government and defeating the Heath Government, John made another watershed decision that might come across as counterintuitive. He said that he did not want to take up the post of Solicitor General for Scotland, because he did not want to be typecast in Scottish affairs and as a lawyer-politician. Perhaps I made a fateful decision when I decided to become a junior shadow Minister in the Scotland Office, but I am proud to have done so in the tradition of John Smith, who was a predecessor of mine and a shadow Scotland Office apparatchik.

John was quickly forgiven and joined the Department of Energy. Cutting across political traditions, he served under Tony Benn who was then Secretary of State for Energy. Benn tasked him with setting up the British National Oil Corporation in Glasgow. Today, it is an office building used by Santander, which encapsulates what Labour was trying to achieve in the 1970s and how it was turned over by Thatcherism. He set up a great institution, which was a vision for mobilising the great resources of North sea oil for the common good and the greater betterment of the nation. Sadly, his vision and the BNOC-Britoil building were dismantled and that tradition and opportunity was lost, but that was another example of John’s vision.

John was promoted to Minister of State under Michael Foot to pilot the Scotland devolution Bill through the Commons. Like Benn, Foot was full of praise for Smith’s loyalty and expertise. His excellent personal relations with Benn and Foot made it much more acceptable that a tough right-winger should be become a Cabinet Minister from 1978. From 1979, until his appointment as the leader of the Labour Party in 1992, he won every shadow Cabinet election.

On his advocacy of devolution, despite much criticism and opposition within the Labour party, John said: “It is the Labour Party which has campaigned to get a Scottish Assembly established. No other political party has pioneered the way in which this Labour Party has.” Indeed, he had disdain for the intransigence on the constitution of both the Conservative party and the nationalist traditions on this question. He recognised that the United Kingdom has great benefit to Scotland, but that it is over-centralised. He sought to create a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh that would give better government to Scotland, while strengthening the United Kingdom. Then, as now, that is the preferred view of most of the people of Scotland, as regularly tested in opinion polls both before and since the 1997 and 2014 referendums. However, he also recognised that not responding imaginatively and vigorously to the need to reform the constitutional structure of Britain would create such tensions from a notion of a democratic deficit and regional imbalance that would only serve to render the fracturing of the United Kingdom altogether as the more likely outcome.

John Smith said in 1992 that there were two forces sawing away at the legs that support the Union: one was the nationalists, who wished to destroy the United Kingdom; and the other was the stupid Conservative party, whose members blundered on oblivious to the consequences that their arrogant actions were having for the future integrity of the United Kingdom. That was borne out in the Conservative party’s opposition to the creation of the Scottish Parliament. And of course the SNP boycotted the Scottish constitutional convention and opposed devolution at the 1997 general election. It is nice to see that John’s understanding of the problem and its solution was proven right by history. There is now much consensus on how he saw the future develop.

John was very proud of the Labour party: proud of its name and proud of its history. He was confident of the contribution it could make to the future progress of our country. He was also proud of Scotland, saying: “as a Scot myself, representing a Scottish constituency, born and brought up in Scotland, living and wishing to continue living in Scotland, a member of a Scots profession, with children at Scottish schools, and having roots too deep in Scotland to wish to ever sever them, I think I am as entitled as any separatist to speak for my fellow countrymen.”

In the particularly vicious discourse that prevails in Scotland in the wake of the 2014 referendum, those sentiments ought to be heard far and wide across Scotland.

On the Labour party, John said it was: “a united and a determined party, impatient for the responsibility of power. Let us communicate our resolve, our ambitions, our values, to the people. For they are ready, they are so ready to listen to the message of hope and of confidence which Labour proudly proclaims.”

Sadly, death robbed him of the opportunity to serve, but the Labour Government of 1997 delivered his unfinished business of home rule. His friend from his days on the floor of the university union to the Floor of this House, Donald Dewar, said at the opening of the Scottish Parliament, almost 20 years ago to the day: “A Scottish Parliament. Not an end: a means to greater ends.”

As John Smith said, “What’s the point of being in politics, if you can’t speak up for the people who can’t speak up for themselves?” That was the greater end to which John Smith sought to achieve a Scottish Parliament. In his maiden speech, he spoke up for his constituents from mining communities about how poverty was affecting them. That must be our task today: to demonstrate the same courage in speaking for the interests of people who cannot speak up for themselves across our constituencies and countries and to share John Smith’s optimism for what public service can achieve so that we can realise our capacity as
a nation and a society to set our own objectives and to set about achieving them in a spirit or resolute determination. May he rest in peace.

4.4 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney). I add my thanks and congratulations to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on having the foresight to recognise that this was an occasion that many of us in the House would want to mark.

Twenty-five years ago, I was a young TV reporter standing in a car park in Aberdeen with a camera crew waiting to interview Tony Blair. We knew that John Smith had had a heart attack that morning and we hoped that Tony Blair’s delayed arrival would bring a statement that all was fine and that John Smith would recuperate and be back soon. Sadly, by the time Tony Blair did arrive, we knew he had a very different outcome to relay to us. My thoughts that day, as on this day, were not merely about politics. I come from a family of three girls who lost their dad to a sudden heart attack at 44, and my thoughts were, and still are, with his girls. I am sure that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South would agree that, wherever Scottish politicians gather, at some point we get to talking about John Smith and what might have been—the country that might have been, the Labour party that might have been, how devolution might have developed differently, how the Labour Government might have acted differently—but we must always remember those lives most closely affected by losing him.

I do not claim to have known John Smith well, but when I was a young reporter he always gave me time and treated my often naïve questions with respect, and he never ever patronised me—something we should all think about as Members. I particularly remember one evening when I was a reporter at Radio Clyde and had to phone him about the latest speculation about whether Neil, now Lord, Kinnock, was about to step down as Labour party leader. Once he had dismissed it as nonsense and said there was no way he would comment on such a ludicrous suggestion, he spent about 20 minutes, maybe half an hour, just chatting with me, putting me right about the situation and telling me what was actually going on in British politics and what I should be aware of. I came away from that conversation, which he did not have to have with me, better informed, and from then on in my career, I had much greater insight into and respect for British politics. I was not the only one, and I do not think it was just because I was a graduate of Glasgow University. I was not the only journalist in Scotland who had for John Smith the sort of respect and admiration the rest of us can often only aspire to. Other Members have spoken about the grief felt across Scotland among politicians. I cannot speak for the politicians of that time—I was not one of them, I was a journalist—but every single one of us felt that day that we had lost something that we perhaps had not valued enough. We saw him as a politician committed to an ideal but with a tolerance, understanding and commitment to people and communities that we would do well to emulate here.

I remember another occasion when I was sent to a pub in Airdrie—if memory serves—on the occasion of John Smith’s first response as shadow Chancellor. I was sent out to get public reaction to what the local MP was going to say, and I came away with a picture of a man regarded in his constituency as “one of us”, as somebody who understood his constituency and spoke for his constituency. He knew exactly what they wanted to hear and what they needed. I contrast that with the detached, two-dimensional picture that politicians often can project today. Maybe we need a little more of whatever it was that John Smith had, because he had something special that gave him a place in the hearts of journalists, politicians, the community and everybody in Scotland.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East spoke about his parents. I remember my mother, a Tory, being distraught on the day John Smith died, because she respected him as a man who lived his politics. A politician to respect is one who enacts their politics in everything—no matter how small—that they do every day. That is what matters.

Looking back over the years, I remember a fantastic evening at the docklands in 1997: Labour’s daybreak party to celebrate what many of us, Labour or not, regarded as a turning point for the country. I remember how much John Smith’s presence was missed that night, as I suspect it has been missed in some way by Members in this place every day for the past 25 years.

I end by thanking the hon. Member for Edinburgh South again. As I got more involved in politics and decided to stand for this place, I kept in mind—even though I am not a member of the Labour party—that phrase of John Smith’s from the evening before he died. All of us who are in this place or who aspire to this place would do well to take it as our guiding principle: what we have here, and what we aspire to, is simply the opportunity to serve.

4.11 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) for securing this debate. We are here to pay tribute to one of my predecessors, John Smith, on the 25th anniversary of his death. As a Member of Parliament, first for North Lanarkshire and then for Monklands East, John represented communities that are now in my constituency, including Carnbroe, Shawhead and Whifflet. He served North Lanarkshire and its communities with distinction in this House and I know that he is held in high regard locally.

When I learned that this debate was to take place, I spoke to another great parliamentary champion of North Lanarkshire, Tom Clarke, who I know is watching today and who was a good friend of John Smith’s. These are his reflections on John as a politician and as a friend:

“John Smith and I first met when he was an outstanding debater at Glasgow University and I was a Young Socialist. We were friends for a very long time. John could have a short fuse at times, but I had never known him to hold grudges. His great gift was his ability to relate warmly with people, whatever their background. He was as at home with miners and steelworkers when they were fighting to save their industries as he was when he met with international leaders.

I was fortunate in being able to be with John for two days before he died when we attended and gave evidence to the Boundary Commission which was considering proposals for our neighbouring constituencies. There was very little that we did not discuss.”
I retain the view that while he took his role seriously, the post he held rested lightly on his shoulders and he was looking forward to the challenges of serving as Prime Minister. It remains one of my greatest regrets that history denied him that opportunity."

I thank both John and Tom for their tireless service in this House on behalf of the people of North Lanarkshire.

John had a distinguished political career and was regarded as a fine parliamentarian. As a Minister in the Labour Government of 1974 to 1979, he was responsible for the initial Scottish and Welsh devolution proposals, as we have heard. He continued to champion the cause of devolution throughout his career; I think he would be proud that this week we are marking 20 years of devolution in Scotland and Wales.

Many commentators have speculated on what a John Smith-led Labour Government would have achieved in the UK. We know that John championed a national minimum wage at a time when it was not popular with some sections of the trade union movement. We know that his Government would have ensured that the richest in our society paid their fair share to support our public services. Indeed, it was John who advocated a 50p tax rate for the highest earners when he served as shadow Chancellor during the 1992 general election. He once said, referring to high tax payers,

"One should shoulder that obligation as part of one’s citizenship and be proud of it.”

We also know that his Government would probably not have led the UK into the disastrous Iraq war.

John Smith’s legacy lives on to this day. It is a fine tribute to him to be here today and to mark those 25 years. The John Smith Trust, formed in 1996, continues his work in promoting good governance, social justice and the rule of law by helping to develop the next generation of leaders committed to making a difference in their countries and societies. I reflect on the fact that many people across the United Kingdom still regret that John Smith was never able to serve as Prime Minister. As I said in my maiden speech—I have heard it said again today—he was one of the best Prime Ministers that this country never had.

I remember the day of John Smith’s death. I was working as a postman at the time and I remember his death because we had suffered for so many years under the Thatcher Government. I was a young man, working, and I was devastated that day, just like everyone else. I had just become a trade union representative. I stood in silence when I heard the news. I think that the whole country did, such was the mark of the man who was John Smith.

I am committed to following in the footsteps of both John and Tom Clarke, representing the people whom they once represented here in the mother of Parliaments. It is an honour and a privilege to do so.

4.16 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): I vividly recall the morning the BBC announced that John Smith had been taken ill. I had a meeting with Liz Pearce, who had been my general election agent and who was a councillor. She had just won us our first position in Redbridge, where we were going to form a Labour administration. Liz worked for me, and we had to have a discussion about the implications of that win for our relationship and whether or not she could continue to work for me. I was expecting it to be a difficult discussion. Then the message came through that John Smith had died. We cancelled our discussion immediately. We could not talk; we could not think. I remember coming here later. We always remember occasions which have such a huge, traumatic impact.

I knew John Smith reasonably well. I knew him when I worked at the Labour party headquarters, in the policy directorate and then in the international section. At the time of the 1992 election, I was the head of that section. From time to time, I would arrange for him to meet incoming delegations. There were good discussions with the Social Democratic Party of Germany about how to modernise the policy of the Labour party.

John Smith, although he was the shadow Chancellor, was much more than that. Neil Kinnock was trying to save the Labour party and bring us back from the abyss of the terrible period that we had suffered, to expel the Trotskyites and modernise the Labour party to make it electable. Although Roy Hattersley, now Lord Hattersley, was the deputy leader, many Members of Parliament said to me that the real deputy leader was John Smith. It was crucial that both wings of the party, the centre left and the centre right, worked together in that modernisation project.

Other Members have already said how important John Smith was in relation to many of the policy reforms of that period. He was also clearly politically principled and brave. The shadow Budget that he published just before the 1992 election, which has not been mentioned yet, was controversial. Some people said—wrongly, in my view—that that was the reason why we did not win the 1992 election, but I remember a conversation with a woman in a queue at a bus stop when I was campaigning for election in ’92. I was fighting a very marginal constituency—we were number 61 on the list and Labour had to win 62 seats to be the biggest party. To cut a long story short, I got here and many others did not. This woman had a pram and young children, and I said, “So are you going to be supporting Labour? You’ll get £6 more; we are very concerned to help people like you.” She said, “No, you’ll just take it away from me in tax.” I asked, “Do you pay income tax? Are you working?” “No,” she said; nevertheless she was convinced she was going to lose it. That is the problem we had sometimes in politics—how to cut through the misunderstanding.

I remember the debates around Maastricht when I came into Parliament in ’92. I remember the discussions we had after Neil Kinnock stood down and John Smith had been elected at a special conference by 90% of the vote for leader against Bryan Gould. Bryan Gould was my constituency neighbour in Dagenham, and I was under some encouragement and pressure from some people locally to support my constituency neighbour, and I did, for deputy leader, but I had no doubt who was going to be the best leader.

John Smith played a brilliant tactical game in those Maastricht debates. He was able to embarrass and undermine the John Major Government on so many occasions. We had one occasion when there was a tied vote and the then Speaker gave the casting vote in favour of the Government, but the next day it was realised that there had been a mistake and the Government had won by one. We have had similar scenarios recently, but fortunately, so far as I am aware, the vote was accurately counted on that occasion.
We had a genius and a real intelligence in our leader at that time and we were surging ahead. Labour in opposition in 1994 was 20 points or more ahead in the opinion polls going into European Parliament elections in 1994. Labour was going to do incredibly well. This was in the pre-proportional days, and we won all 10 seats in London. The campaign and platform was established under John Smith, but it was Margaret Beckett who took us into those elections because tragically we no longer had John.

The party then moved to a younger generation, and the modernisation project, started by Neil Kinnock and continued by John Smith, was then continued under Tony Blair. That led to not one, not two, but three general election victories, and all the great achievements of that Labour Government, which, sadly, are not recognised enough by some in the Labour party today. I am not going to make a speech attacking the current leadership of the Labour party; I have done that before and will not do so today. I will simply say that John Smith, on this Europe day, would have read the election manifestos for the European elections with some degree of concern. He would have wanted a passionate case to be made for remaining in the European Union and for reforming it, as he argued, in speeches that have been quoted today, when he broke the Whip all those years ago, and as the Labour party argued, under his leadership, in the 1994 European election campaign. A moderate, mainstream and—in Labour terms—centre-right political leader, he was passionately pro-European, and in those days, that led to a significant electoral victory in those European elections. Let us look back 25 years to what could have been, and then look at where we are today.

John Smith had some very nice human qualities. I remember sitting in the House of Commons Library late one night in 1993; there was almost no one else there, but suddenly I saw the Leader of the Opposition walking around looking for a book. We have not often seen Leaders of the Opposition of any party doing that in recent years. [Interruption. I do not mean reading books; I mean walking round the Library in a normal kind of way. Also in 1993, John organised a reception in his room for all of us who had been elected a year earlier, on 9 April 1992. I was not there at the start of the reception because I had to rush from hospital, where my wife had given birth to our daughter. I remember this vividly, because when I arrived, everyone applauded me when it was announced that I had become a father that day. That is a strong personal memory for me.

I also recall John saying, in that discussion with all of us who had entered Parliament the year before, “You have all got to learn how this place works. Spend your time understanding parliamentary procedure. Understand how Committees, questions and early-day motions work. Get to know what you will be doing here. I am not going to make any of you members of my shadow team. I want you to get an understanding of this place over the next few years. Some of you will be Ministers when we have a Labour Government, but I will want people who really understand how this place works.” What a contrast that is to the things that have happened since then.

John Smith was a great parliamentarian. He loved Parliament and he loved the debates. He is, and will be, sorely missed.

4.28 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and to contribute to this debate, not just on behalf of the Scottish National party but on behalf of my constituents, many of whom were also John Smith’s constituents. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing the debate. I supported his application for it, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this time in the main Chamber. The hon. Member for Edinburgh South spoke eloquently, although I did not agree with everything he said, as I am sure he will understand. However, there is no doubt that he did John Smith’s memory justice. My thoughts, like his, will be with John’s family this weekend.

Others who made moving speeches in the debate—those who knew John and those who did not—also did his memory justice. They all made their tributes well.

I did not know John Smith. Many people remark that I must have had a very tough paper round, but I hope it is self-evident that I did not know him—I was eight years old and growing up in Orkney when he sadly died. Although I did not know him, in preparation for today’s debate I have spoken to people, locally in my constituency and nationally, who did. The great sense that I get not just from this debate, but from the people I have spoken to is of someone who was clear about what he believed in and had the talents to realise his ambitions, but who was humble enough to be inclusive and egalitarian.

Peter Sullivan became a Labour councillor in the Cairnhill area of Airdrie—now the Airdrie Central ward—when John was the local MP. I spoke to Peter last night and, despite the fact that they had disagreements, like so many others Peter spoke of someone whom we would all wish to see leading in politics today. He said that John was a humble man without being a humble person in that, despite his undoubted abilities, he never sought to demean or make anyone feel small.

What Peter really appreciated was that John Smith made time for other people and took the time to canvass for him and to knock on doors, which worked because local people trusted John, meaning that they voted for Peter. Even if he was too polite and spent too long speaking to people who clearly were not going to support Labour, he was dignified and always listened even when people disagreed with him. He gave them the respect they deserved before politely offering his counter-argument.

What struck me from reading the biographies and the book dedicated to John, which was edited by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), was his inclusiveness and willingness—even eagerness—to surround himself when Leader of the Opposition with people with whom he disagreed, and the aeroplane analogy of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) is quite fitting. That is what John’s best man Jimmy Gordon—now Lord Gordon—remembers as well. John had huge respect for Back Benchers and wanted to listen to them, regardless of whether they agreed with him. Jimmy thinks that that was because of John’s deep-rooted belief that everyone entered politics as a
public service. We may disagree on particular issues, but John tolerated political difference because he respected everyone who made the sacrifices necessary to enter politics as a public service.

That tolerance has struck me because we have a real problem in politics at the moment with people at all levels who do not have that same strength of character, the same tolerance, the same confidence of their conviction, and the same ability to use the art of debate to persuade that John Smith had. We are living in a time of political intolerance, which is a problem for all our parties, our political movements and all of us. That intolerance has led to a culture in which abusing politicians and other public figures is becoming normalised. When John Major paid tribute to John Smith in this House in the hours after his death, he spoke of someone he debated with vigorously in public, but with whom he could share a respectful drink in private. Now there is a dangerous tribalism under which people are incapable of being wrong, we do not allow ourselves the space to accept nuance, and pragmatism is looked on with suspicion.

If we are to tackle abusive behaviour online and in public, it is incumbent on politicians to show some leadership. Yes, call out problems where we see them, as some of my colleagues did at the weekend, but also show a little more respect to one another and more tolerance for people with opposing views. Debate with John’s passion, but have a civilised relationship afterwards, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) rightly said. Otherwise, I fear that we will move to a politics in which creative thinking and collaboration are impossible.

There is no doubt that John Smith was a thinker. We have already heard of the policies that he proposed that are still his legacy to this day, but Peter Sullivan says that he was coming up with new policies that had not appeared in Labour’s manifesto for the upcoming elections. Those policies included allowing council tenants to live rent free after a period spent in council housing, such as 25 years. I can certainly see the attraction of that policy, and I am sure that others on the progressive side of politics would, too.

John is remembered locally as someone who was accessible and worked hard for his constituents, but he will be remembered by most as a formidable parliamentarian. Jim Sillars was a member of the parliamentary Labour party at the same time as John Smith and remembers how he used his forensic skill as a defence lawyer in parliamentary debates. However, like Peter Sullivan, Jim saw someone with the necessary human touch that is required in political leaders, but is sometimes lacking. The valuable asset, as Jim describes it, was John’s sense of humour coupled with a sense of humility. It was that humility that drew me to quote, of all my many illustrious predecessors, John Smith’s maiden speech in my own first contribution in this place. He was humble enough to admit his nerves before that maiden speech, and in his last speech he said he just wanted to serve and that he genuinely believed in public service.

As Jim says, John did not see himself as exalted but as fortunate to be given the opportunity to work on people’s behalf. Jim is right, and that should be what drives all of us. Lord Gordon agrees and feels that that feeling of public service is being lost, not just by a small number of those involved in politics but by those who observe and comment on politics, who often forget that public service is what drives the majority of us.

In that regard, it is timely that the former leader of the Labour party in Scotland, Kezia Dugdale, should be taking up her post at the John Smith centre for public service. I am sure we all wish her well, and I know John’s family are still deeply involved with the centre.

People locally and nationally often speculate as to what might have happened had it not been for John Smith’s untimely death, and we heard some speculation in this debate. Would Labour have won in 1997? Undoubtedly. Would the Labour Government still have been radical and popular? Almost certainly. Would we have gone to war in Iraq? Unlikely.

But I do not think John Smith’s legacy should just be his policy ideas or his unfulfilled destiny, because although I agree with much of what he stood on politically, I cannot agree with all his political decisions. What should be remembered is what he stood for. That should be his legacy and a lesson to unite people in politics today. We can agree or disagree with John Smith’s politics, but we should admire and aspire to his tolerance, his humility, his inclusiveness, his egalitarianism and his eagerness to serve the people.

4.36 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I share the last sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). We remember the man.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) for securing this debate, because John Smith was still a towering figure for many of us. The words spoken today on both sides of the House are a tribute to the high regard in which John Smith is held not simply by those who knew him but by those who are, in some ways, heirs to what he stood for.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is right in saying that Conservative Members claim John Smith as a fellow parliamentarian, which is right and proper. And it is right that the Scots in this Chamber claim John as a Scot, and they should be proud that John was such a proud Scot. We, of course, claim him as Labour, because John was Labour. Whatever John Smith was in his life, he stood for the values and principles on which the Labour party was founded and he took them forward so ably.

It is almost axiomatic that John’s moral view of the world was that social justice was at the heart of what he stood for in politics and of what he believed the Labour party had to stand for. That is an eternal message for my party, and politics across the world needs people who will challenge injustice on behalf of those who cannot speak up for themselves—we have heard those words repeated on numerous occasions—and that is the hallmark of what John Smith was all about.

John Smith was, in many ways, a model Member of Parliament from a Chief Whip’s point of view. Madam Deputy Speaker, as a former Chief Whip you will know the value of such discipline. The present Labour Chief Whip, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), will not be dismayed if I point out, as others have done, that although John Smith broke the Whip on only one occasion, he did so on a matter of fundamental principle—his passionate belief that Britain is a necessary part of a larger structure, the then European Economic Community. He could not, therefore, go along with the mainstream of Labour votes at the time.
[Tony Lloyd]

I therefore use this opportunity to quote another leader of the Labour party who is known for having broken the Labour Whip once or twice, the present Leader of the Opposition. He has asked me to read these words into the record:

“John Smith was Labour to his core. His politics were those of a genuine social democrat—he promoted equality, supported trade unionism, and believed in a kinder, more caring society.

Not only that, but he was an exceptionally decent and inclusive Leader of the Labour Party. I joined the Labour Party in the 1960s, and of all the Labour leaders I knew, John was the one I admired the most.

I will never forget his speech to the Labour Party Conference in 1993...promising the same legal rights to every worker from day one of their employment, part-time or full-time, temporary or permanent.

It has taken too long, but the next Labour government will deliver on John’s commitment.

His death was a tragedy, not just for his own family and friends, but also for the Labour Party, and the country as a whole.”

What lies within those words is sometimes missed. It has been said today that John Smith was moderate and right-of-centre in Labour party terms. Actually, that is not a strictly accurate interpretation of what he was about; he was more radical than people believe. The fact is that he was comfortable with Labour’s traditions—comfortable talking about employment rights and advocating them, as I heard him do many times in this Chamber when he was shadow Secretary of State for Employment during the passage of Norman Tebbit’s draconian anti trade union Bill. John Smith was a passionate defender of the rights of people in the workplace. He was sponsored by the Amalgamated Society of Boilermakers, along with my good friend Gerald Kaufman—perhaps the two most unlikely boilermakers ever to hit this place. Nevertheless, they were committed to the principles of that union and what trade unionism was about in the Britain of that time, and that remains relevant to the United Kingdom of today.

As has been mentioned, John could also claim significance in the debate about the minimum wage. I was on the shadow employment team for a time during that period: we were told by the Government that the minimum wage would cost 1 million jobs, which was then hiked to 2 million jobs. It did not cost those jobs, of course—it was part of creating a fairer society. The interesting point is that while John Smith was leader the issue was massively controversial, even within the Labour party. Some of our major trade unions at the time were saying that it would erode wages for their own members. That argument was strenuously put forward, but John Smith was one of those who said that that argument could not prevail. People were on derisory wages that have been forgotten now. Hairdressers were sometimes on wages so outrageous that it was impossible for them to support their families. Fighting for that kind of social justice was radical, and the hallmark of the then Leader of the Opposition.

John had enormous intellectual gifts as a parliamentarian. Almost every friend and colleague I have spoken to about him has a memory of John’s decision-making capacity. He would come to quick and robust conclusions about what was right and proper, sometimes on issues that mattered but did not necessarily have a strong policy bent. Lord Foulkes—then George Foulkes, shadow Foreign Minister—travelled with John Smith to China. They had many engagements with the Chinese Deputy Prime Minister, who would raise questions of policy. John would turn to George, who told me he would stammer out some quick response about what he hoped the policy was. John instantly turned it into something that sounded credible and competent, and was accepted by the Chinese Deputy Prime Minister as the voice of a party ready for government.

I saw John Smith in a similar light when he took on controversial policies. The promotion of comprehensive education was an issue in the ’90s just as it is today. John was easily persuaded that social justice was on the side of taking forward that reforming step. That was controversial, but he was prepared to take on controversy if he believed it was the right thing to do.

As a politician, John was gifted and formidable in this place. Reference was made to the YouTube videos that David Ward has made available. David will be glad to know that I watched one of them—it is some years since we have seen each other, so I am delighted to see him in the Under-Gallery—and it was interesting to see how full the Chamber was when John Smith spoke. He was one of those people: everyone would be encouraged to come in to listen to him—to his bulldozer drive against the Government of the day, his forensic skills, his strong intellectual ability and, of course, his devastating wit. Sometimes, that devastating wit was most telling of all. The then Prime Minister John Major had apparently written a chapter in a book about football called “We’ll Support You Evermore”; as John Smith said at the time, it was obviously not a Tory party publication. I would venture to say, without introducing too much bitter politics into the debate, that we could make the same claim today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East will not be unhappy if I recall the fact that although people talk about John being a kind man—and he was; he was very forgiving and prepared to heal the enmities, or at least some of them, that existed in his time—he was also very caustic when he wanted to be. My right hon. Friend was at the Dispatch Box as a junior shadow Treasury Minister being harangued by Government Members, three of whom stood up to challenge him to give way on some point. Gordon Brown was on my right hon. Friend’s right, giving him a stream of statistics and a robust intellectual defence of the Labour case; John Smith turned to my right hon. Friend and said, “Just pick the most stupid.” That was not reported in the Hansard of the day.

I wish to turn for a few moments to John Smith as a family man. Those of us who met and know Elizabeth—she is Baroness Smith, but Elizabeth is probably a kinder way to refer to her—know that she is still intensely proud all these years on, just as John’s daughters, Sarah, Jane and Catherine, are intensely proud of their father. John was a family man, although as Elizabeth said to me, as he was in political life, he was a family man in very short spurts. They still enormously value the family holidays and family time they had on the island of Iona. It was so important, not only for John as a human being, gaining himself away from being the man of politics, but for John as a man more widely, with his family being part of something wider for that wider human being.
In John’s memory, the John Smith Trust continues to do incredibly valuable and powerful work, particularly in central Asia. John was passionately committed not simply to social justice but to the principles of good government that have been carried forward in the determination to train a generation of political leaders in central Asia in particular. They bear his name as fellows of the John Smith Trust. That is a remarkable signal to us all.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts said that John Smith was a humble man; I am not quite sure that I entirely agree with that description, because one of the good things about John’s background—not only his family background but his time at the University of Glasgow debating society and all the rest—was that he had confidence in himself, his politics and his belief system. He had confidence in his humanity, which is important. So he was not a humble man, but he was a simple man. A simple man is probably the most vividly fitting description when we think of the place that John chose for his burial on Iona: a very simple grave and memorial. Something very simple for a very decent man who graced this place, graced our politics and graced those who knew him.

4.50 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Members for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) on securing the debate. I am also grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time to it.

With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall keep my remarks relatively short, not from a lack of respect but because, unlike so many other Members who have contributed to the debate, I did not know John Smith personally. None the less, it is an honour to wind up the debate on behalf of the Government. I am not quite as young as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who I believe was five at the time of John’s death, or as the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who was eight. I was a 15-year-old Tory boy at my local comprehensive, rather lonely position in the mid-1990s, as Members might imagine—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) says from a sedentary position that it toughened me, and it certainly did.

It is a sign of the contribution made by John Smith that, even among teenage Tory boys like me, he was regarded as a towering political figure and there was a genuine and profound sense of shock when we heard of his death. It is a sign of his legacy that 25 years later here we are in this Chamber discussing it. So much of what he did, whether on devolution or the national minimum wage, and the way in which he conducted his politics still seem fresh and relevant to politics today.

That is a true tribute to the legacy of John Smith.

My politics and my interest in politics were certainly stimulated by John Smith and I certainly remember those Maastricht debates and the incredible skill that he had—he simultaneously supported the Government on Maastricht and managed to sow division within the Conservative party and inflict defeats on it. Like many others, I also remember his funeral. It was a unique expression of the affection and respect he commanded, not just from the Labour party but from the Prime Minister and other major figures from every party and every area of national life who crowded into that simple parish church in Edinburgh to say goodbye to a man whose basic decency and good sense we could ill afford to lose. As our then Conservative Prime Minister, Sir John Major, said, he was “one of the outstanding parliamentarians of modern politics. He was skilled in the procedures of this House, skilled in upholding its traditions, a fair-minded but, I can say as well as any Member in the House, tough fighter for what he believed in and, above all, he was outstanding in parliamentary debate.”

He went on to talk about “the waste of a remarkable political talent”—[Official Report, 12 May 1994; Vol. 243, c. 429.]

and that certainly was raised by many hon. Members, not least the hon. Member for Edinburgh South.

I think that I can say without any risk of contradiction from any of my hon. Friends that if a Conservative Member of Parliament was ever asked to name the greatest Labour Prime Minister we never had, we would all choose John Smith. As many Members have reminded us, many of the causes that John Smith championed are still relevant today. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling talked about the role John Smith played in devolution. In many ways, he was the godfather of devolution.

Some Members may have heard the Radio 4 programme last weekend, recalling the path to devolution, in which John Smith’s daughter recalled a dinner very shortly after her father’s death to which both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were invited. Tony Blair apparently earnestly asked John Smith’s daughter how committed her father really was to Scottish devolution, and she apparently left him in absolutely no doubt about the strength of his commitment to that cause.

Other Members, particularly those who worked with John Smith—especially the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who made an excellent contribution—mentioned his basic human decency. It was also brought out very well by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) that it is easy to overlook his role as a family man and that his death deprived his wife of her husband and three girls of their father.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said something that we could all do with remembering on both sides of the House: for a political plane to take off, it needs both its left and right wings fully intact. That speaks to a wider role that John Smith played in promoting a civility in British politics that, as so many hon. Members have rightly observed, is sometimes lacking in these turbulent times. Despite only leading his party for approximately two years, a genuinely huge expectation had built up behind his leadership in 1994, but this never inhibited him from being an open, congenial and good-humoured man, as his colleagues have attested—not matter what their political allegiance.

Perhaps I may be forgiven for concluding my remarks by re-quoting the oft-uttered words of John Smith the night before he died that many hon. Members have also observed today:

“The opportunity to serve our country—that is all we ask.”

And what a fitting legacy of that great man.
4.57 pm

Ian Murray: This has been a worthwhile debate to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the death of John Smith, and I am grateful to all Members from across the Chamber who have contributed some of their stories, which have been moving and appropriate for this commemorative anniversary, and I have enjoyed hearing them. I may have been listening to them for the second or third time in the past few weeks, but I have certainly enjoyed hearing them in public. I pay tribute to everyone who knew John and to the staff team who worked with him. Sometimes when I sit in this place, I get a bit envious because I have not experienced some of the history of this Chamber. Indeed, I felt a bit envious this afternoon, listening to the stories of people who worked with John and who saw him in the flesh at the Dispatch Box, doing what he did best. I think the greatest tribute is to try to emulate our political heroes, and we should certainly all try to do that in this case.

I wrote down some words as Members were making their contributions: outstanding, civilized, missed, great, inclusive, dignified, listener, formidable, humility, tolerance, gifted, social justice, forgiving, humane, community, responsibility, fun, the common touch, moral commitment, caring, traditional, idealistic, friend. Those words just sum up what John Smith’s life, including his political life, was about. I am glad that we have been able to commemorate this anniversary in the House. As I have said, all our thoughts over this weekend—especially on the 25th anniversary on Sunday 12 May—will be with Sarah, Jane, Catherine, Elizabeth and the wider family.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It has been a very powerful and moving debate. You have all done a giant of a man proud, and I hope that his family and friends will appreciate it; I am sure they will.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the 25th anniversary of the death of John Smith, former leader of the Labour Party.

4.59 pm

A14 Cambridge-Huntingdon Upgrade

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

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing the House the opportunity again to consider the very important issue of the A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon upgrade; the diversions that those works have required; and, I am afraid, the misery that those diversions have caused to so many of my constituents. It is sad to have to follow such an uplifting debate about John Smith with one on an issue such as this.

To those who follow Adjournment debates closely, this topic may feel somewhat familiar because last July I was standing in this very place holding a debate with almost exactly the same title. To paraphrase the Prime Minister, nothing has changed. That is because, frankly, the problems outlined almost a year ago have not been rectified and, I am afraid, the misery continues. But one thing has changed—one positive thing. I am delighted that, whereas last year the Minister was not available, today he is. That means that we are able to continue our very regular dialogue, which is usually conducted through the Transport Committee.

It is very tempting just to re-read my speech from last July, where I outlined the history of the project and praised those such as John Bridge from the chamber of commerce who have done so much to secure the project, as well as Doug Whyte and Elaine Gristwood, and Councillors Claire Richards and Jocelyne Scutt, who have done so much to continue to highlight the problems faced by residents and constituents. I also praised those involved in what is a fantastic project: David Bray and his entire team from Highways England—the construction workers, civil engineers and project managers. It is a truly impressive project.

There is no doubt that the upgrade is absolutely vital because the existing A14 trunk road between Cambridge and Huntingdon is notorious for congestion and delays. About 85,000 vehicles use this stretch of the A14 every day—many more than the road was originally designed to take. About a quarter of those vehicles are heavy goods vehicles—well above the national average for this type of road, adding to the need for an upgrade.

There have been some hugely impressive innovations involved in this project. Only this week, I read in The Cambridge News about the self-driving truck—a massive truck—deployed to speed up the works. Some of the bridge installations have been quite astonishing, truly impressive and watched in fascination. It is a deeply impressive engineering endeavour but, sadly, managing the disruption caused to local residents has been much less successful. I am here not to berate Highways England, or even the Conservative county council, under-resourced as it is, because that is a wider issue, but to raise the disruption that this project has caused to residents in my city of Cambridge and the surrounding villages.

Let me go into more detail about the problem. The road closures caused by these works have resulted in an official diversion strategy of overnight closures from Highways England that adds about 30 miles to the journeys of those driving lorryloads across the country, taking them along a strategic diversion route that includes the M11, the A505 and the A11 back to junction 36 on
the A14. Given that it is such a lengthy diversion, it is unsurprising that some drivers choose to shortcut through Cambridge along King's Hedges Road, Milton Road, Victoria Road, Newmarket Road, Histon Road and Huntingdon Road. The overnight road closures that began to cause trucks to drive through the city's small roads started about a year ago and, I am afraid, have been unrelenting from the beginning. A year on, my constituents still face grim traffic, sleepless nights and even damage to their property. In the debate last year, the Minister’s colleague promised what she called a “step change in diversions” in September. My first specific question to the Minister today is to ask what happened to that step change and what we can expect over the next few months.

The shortcuts through the city disrupt the lives of those who live in and around my city. Roads inappropriate for HGVs are used. One, Victoria Road, already has a weight limit, which could be extended on a temporary basis to other similarly inappropriate streets, or to an even wider area still. Labour County Councillors Jocelyne Scutt and Claire Richards, and their officers, have been working hard to ameliorate the problem, working on a range of measures such as replacing pothole lids with new ones to make them quieter, looking at some of the weight and speed restrictions on certain roads, and maximising signage.

However, the problem is that it is ultimately completely inappropriate to have hundreds of HGVs thundering along residential roads through the city at night. I have heard, in some cases on many occasions, from exhausted constituents regarding the huge noise disturbances on the roads that I have mentioned. I know that neighbouring MPs have heard the same from residents in villages such as Swavesey, Histon and Impington, where, I am told, houses shake from the HGVs’ impact and people are similarly kept up all night by the noise.

In the city of Cambridge, one constituent told me: “We had many trucks rattling down Victoria Road again from around 4 am (or earlier) until at least 5 am this morning, badly disrupting sleep... Does this mean that, yet again, the drivers can simply ignore the signage—and the law—when they choose? Is anything more being done about this issue?” That is precisely the problem. There is no effective mechanism that any authority seems to be able to use to combat the issue and I will return to that point.

Constituents have also told me about serious road traffic congestion problems. One wrote to me saying that it has “come to something when you’ve got to queue to get out of your own drive at 4.30am to go to work and the lorries are backed up.” To most of us, that seems a quite extraordinary situation, but that is what people are facing—traffic queues in the middle of the night. It is playing havoc with the lives of hard-working people in and around the city, destroying their sleep and their routines. It is also causing significant damage to infrastructure—which is ironic, as it is a result of other infrastructure improvements—because local roads are just not designed for this type of traffic.

I was told by my constituent and local campaigner Doug Whyte: “There are already pot-holes and crumbling road surfaces on the range of measures such as replacing pothole lids with new ones to make them quieter, looking at some of the weight and speed restrictions on certain roads, and maximising signage. “

“Another constituent pointed out that the council’s current programme of road improvements will turn out to be “a total waste of our money, as it will all be churned up by the HGVs again”.

The mismanagement of the diversions will affect the work by councils to improve their local areas, while costing taxpayers extra money.

The damage is not only to public infrastructure and property. My constituent Elaine Gristwood explained to the A14 team: “We have noticed over the last few months that we have cracking to all the ceilings in our house which were not there prior to these closures. As reported to yourselves last year with the HGVs coming down Kings Hedges Road the whole house shakes and we are sure this is what has caused the cracking to these ceilings. It now makes us wonder how much more damage is going to occur due to this diversion, and how many other houses along this route are affected. We would like to know how we can claim compensation for these issues caused by this diversion.” She was told: “Whilst we sympathise with your concerns about the damage to your property, I’m afraid there’s no grounds for a claim”.

Where can Elaine and other residents go from here?

That is the human misery and infrastructure damage caused as an unintended consequence. The question I would like to address is, what can be done? One of the key points I raised last year was the accuracy of data. We can all agree that there will inevitably be disruption with any project like this, and my constituents understand and appreciate that. The question is, how much is reasonable? To make any rational judgment, the most basic element is at least having data on how many traffic movements are being generated.

In the debate last July, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), told us: “Highways England is working with Cambridgeshire County Council to implement... HGV counters”—[Official Report, 19 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 698].

That is fine, but she went on to quote figures for nights when closures were taking place that seemed to be surprisingly—in fact, suspiciously—low. I have been pursuing that since last July and, astonishingly, we still cannot get accurate and reliable data, despite the well-intended promises made by the Minister that evening.

Anecdotally, I am told that residents are counting from 50 to more than 100 HGVs an hour in the middle of the night. When I looked at the data from the counter that was sent to me following the debate, the numbers were tiny by comparison. To my astonishment, the data also seemed to be telling us that there were virtually no vehicle movements during the daytime, but anyone who knows Cambridge knows that traffic is frequently gridlocked at that point. Quite frankly, the data was wrong. Last year I asked, somewhat rhetorically, whether the Government think it is more efficient for residents to stay up through the night counting the vehicles manually or to rely on BBC news reporters to do the same. If we have the technology to move a bridge, surely we can install at least a camera and count the number of vehicle movements. This is a woeful failure, and I hope we can have an assurance from the Minister today that at least the data issues will be resolved, so that we can have a rational discussion based on evidence.

That brings me to a bigger problem. This huge and impressive £2 billion project is being spoiled, because our public services around the project are now so fragmented and under-resourced that they are unable to do what would be necessary to make diversions work. The main problem is that, with so many authorities potentially involved, it is unclear who leads or takes
responsibility. We have a combined authority, which has strategic responsibilities. We have a woefully under-resourced county council, which has responsibility for local roads. We have a metro mayor and a police and crime commissioner. We have the local police and we have Highways England. Local residents ask, “Who’s in charge?”—maybe the Minister can tell us.

When residents first came to me with this problem, I went to the council, which then directed me to Highways England, which then referred me to the Department for Transport and the police. We have so many different agencies involved and, frankly, they do not communicate properly and clearly with each other, let alone with the public. When I ask what should be a relatively simple question, such as “Why can’t these diversions be properly enforced?” no one can in the end give me a clear answer that does not end up blaming one of the other partners. No one is prepared to take the lead and no one is prepared to push for solutions. This is very frustrating for me and local councillors but, most importantly, it leaves residents in the lurch.

This is not just an issue for this project. When talking to others elsewhere in the country, I have been told that similar problems have emerged in other major schemes and diversions. The county council does have some potential powers and we have talked about those with the council—traffic regulation orders, weight limits and so on—and it is true that there are complexities in distinguishing genuinely local traffic from freight passing through, but the basic problem is that ignoring a 30-mile diversion is a perfectly rational thing to do if there are no consequences.

That is the policy point that I would like the Minister to focus on for the future: how we provide a disincentive for people to take the short cut. I have to say that, with cameras, automatic number plate recognition and all the modern technologies available to us, it does seem to me to be perfectly possible to come up with a solution. Put crudely, if it costs lorries more to take the short cut, they will stop doing it, but it does need the Government to get a grip. The local agencies have neither the powers nor the resources to make it happen.

As we have tried to come up with local solutions, we have hit persistent obstacles—not least the lack of resources in local policing to enforce any mechanism that could be put in place. Sadly, as I think we all know, traffic policing has virtually disappeared. That is backed up by the fact that Highways England actually offered to pay for more policing to enforce the diversion. When it did so, however, it transpired that there simply are not enough police officers available for the force to spare, regardless of the offer from Highways England to pay for them.

When I spoke to the police and crime commissioner’s office, I got a factually accurate, if rather depressingly defeatist, account of basically why it could not do anything. I was told that “it is currently an ongoing issue that the Constabulary have had to deal with...surrounding the A14 upgrade. The diversion routes are clearly signposted, however, they are not enforceable and drivers cannot be made to follow these routes. There is currently nothing to stop HGVs using Huntingdon Road and Histon Road to bypass the ongoing overnight closures as there is no weight limit in place. Victoria Road however is subject to a 7.5 tonne weight limit between the hours of 23:00 and 07:30.” That was it. Basically the message is: nothing we can do. Frankly, that is simply not good enough, which is why I am rather looking forward to discussing further with the Minister some of the ideas I am proposing in a meeting that we have scheduled for next week.

To conclude, I have some questions for the Minister. How long will the current closures really go on for? How are we going to get accurate data, as the A14 team themselves have accepted that the current numbers are incorrect? How will he ensure that the diversions are managed properly, that my residents can sleep at night and that their houses and roads are not damaged at their expense? Just for good measure, is there any chance of convincing his Cabinet colleagues to stop running down the public services that are so essential for supporting big infrastructure projects such as this?

I will leave the Minister with a final image. In December last year, the local press reported on Barbara Placido, who woke up in her home one morning to find that an articulated lorry had torn through a small garden wall and crashed into the corner of her house. This was actually the second time that it had happened and it was in the heart of Cambridge; it is a lovely line of houses overlooking Jesus Green. I am sure the Minister knows Cambridge well. What on earth was that lorry doing there? She told the Cambridge News:

“We’re not being protected on our streets. It is really disheartening.”

This gets to the crux of the matter: there is no protection for residents between the myriad different agencies involved in this project.

The A14 upgrade should be a regional improvement and a showcase of UK civil engineering, which it is. However, it has also become a nightmare for motorists and passengers stuck in grim traffic queues, too often a headache for people finding regular journeys taking far longer than expected and, as I have outlined, a misery for residents in Cambridge and the surrounding areas. I hope the Minister will be able to outline how he will improve things.

In the debate last July, I invited the Minister to commit properly to resourcing a framework to ensure that HGV drivers follow the proper diversions. In my view, those who do not should be named, shamed, and fined to protect the people of Cambridge—or whichever area is under pressure—who currently lack protection. But guess what? Nothing has changed. A year on, can the Minister persuade me that we will not be having the same debate this time next year? Indeed, I have an inkling that, by later in the year, some things will have changed, hopefully for the better.

5.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this debate about the A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon upgrade. He is a genial although troublingly probing inquisitor on the Transport Committee, and it is always a great pleasure to discuss these issues with him. I look forward to this being the first half of a little two-step, with the second half at our meeting next week. In an Adjournment debate last summer, he diligently raised his constituents’ concerns, particularly about the impact of road diversions through Cambridgeshire as a result of the A14 scheme. He need not repeat his speech—I am glad he did not—because I have read it with care and attention. I was not able to
attend that debate, but I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who responded in my stead.

I wish to use this opportunity to outline what Highways England has done, and is continuing to do, to reduce the impact of the scheme’s road diversions on local residents. Inevitably, much of that will revisit issues already discussed in the previous debate. It is important to be clear that this is a genuinely difficult issue for reasons I will come to, and we do not need conspiracy theories or worries about overlapping or underlapping jurisdictions to recognise the genuine difficulty of this situation.

I will come on to discuss the road diversions in some detail, but let me remind the hon. Gentleman of some of the strategic reasons for the scheme and provide an update on Highways England’s progress in delivering it. As he and any local resident or traveller in that part of the world will know, The Cambridge to Huntingdon section is one of the busiest parts of the strategic road network between the midlands and East Anglia and the port of Felixstowe. It is vital to connecting businesses, communities and families across Cambridgeshire and beyond, and a crucial corridor for international freight. It is also a long-standing congestion hotspot and an area of concern for the communities around it.

In delivering upgrades to the A14, Highways England and my Department acknowledged that the demand placed on it was taking an increasing toll on drivers and local residents. Commutes between Huntingdon and Cambridge were severely congested, and small villages on either side of the road suffered from increased traffic caused by drivers rat-running to avoid traffic delays on the A14. The scheme was drawn up in recognition of those concerns and in an attempt to alleviate them. That is why the A14 improvement works were included as a major project in the Department’s five-year road investment strategy, which was published in December 2014. In a measure of how important the scheme was to the local community, local authorities and local enterprise partnerships committed £100 million towards the total £1.5 billion cost. That contribution will help to deliver a scheme that meets the needs of the strategic road network and local people.

The benefits to local road users and communities include 21 miles of new three-lane dual carriageway road—that was mentioned in the debate last year—a new 750-metre viaduct; the removal of the existing unsightly viaduct in Huntingdon town centre; two new footbridges at Swavesey junction and Bar Hill; and—this is the bit I really like—more than 18 miles of routes that are suitable for walking, cycling and horse-riding. The goal, which we believe the scheme will achieve, is to create a positive legacy that ties communities together, unlocks regional and local economic growth, combats congestion and improves road safety. Relieving congestion will make travel, particularly commuting, easier, safer and more reliable. We hope the scheme, along with better design, will improve road safety.

The scheme separates strategic and local traffic, which will help to reduce congestion. It has been designed to accommodate the expected significant growth in the area over the next 15 years or so. This will be vital if the scheme’s benefits are to continue. I understand we are looking at a 26% growth in traffic. Cambridgeshire’s employment alone is forecast to grow by 16% between 2012 and 2031. We hope there will also be improvements to air quality and a reduction in traffic noise. Highways England never undertakes any scheme without paying careful attention to the environment and local wildlife. The scheme will deliver nearly 700 hectares of new habitat for wildlife and 18 new wildlife habitat creation areas, and hundreds of bat boxes and a variety of bird boxes will be installed. All of that adds up to a highly attractive and important scheme that creates a positive legacy for the residents and businesses of Cambridgeshire.

The scheme has also created jobs through the new Highways College in west Anglia, which was opened to give up to 200 local people the skills needed to get the road built. Highways England is making good progress on the scheme. It is within budget and on target to meet an open-for-traffic date in 2020, as outlined in the road investment strategy, although it would be nice to think that it will be possible to take some of the diversions off before the end of that period. That is certainly the aspiration, but the open-for-traffic date at the end of 2020 is the stipulated date.

Turning to the hon. Gentleman’s specific concerns about noise and disruption for residents on and off the official diversion routes caused by the scheme’s construction, as he knows the Government and Highways England are focused on ensuring that the delivery of the scheme causes the minimum inconvenience to local residents, while recognising that some inconvenience is inevitable in a scheme of this magnitude. Since the issue was raised of HGVs, lorries and other vehicles not following the recommended road diversions, Highways England has been working hard to develop measures that will help to lessen those impacts and encourage more drivers to use the preferred diversion routes. As he noted, it is working closely with Cambridgeshire County Council and partner organisations to minimise the impact where possible.

When closures are in place on the A14 between junction 36 and junction 31, the strategic diversion route directs traffic south of Cambridge to what, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, is a substantial detour. The trouble is that alternative routes are required for non-motorway traffic. This is where we get into the genuine complexity of the issue. There is non-motorway traffic and local traffic travelling to local destinations, where the strategic diversion would be considered irrelevant or not acceptable. Those routes take traffic further into and around Cambridge city centre and include, as he mentioned, Kings Hedges Road, Newmarket Road and Milton Road.

Highways England has no powers to prevent road users, including HGVs, taking other routes they have a legal right to use as an alternative to the official strategic diversion. As the hon. Gentleman knows, traffic is like water—it tends to flow down the channels of least resistance. Blocking traffic on some local roads inevitably diverts it on to other local roads, and that creates complexity for the scheme. Highways England is working actively to keep strategic traffic—we are talking about a very small percentage of thousands and thousands of journeys every day—following official diversion routes. This includes giving weekly briefings to regional media, parish councils and local organisations, and posts on social media. There are also over 40 roadside signs, some including instructions not to follow sat-nav systems, up to 13 mobile variable messaging signs, and the use of
overhead signs further afield on the strategic road network. Works have also been resequenced to resolve technical challenges involving utilities and drainage. The A14 project team are working with the Road Haulage Association and Freight Transport Association so that diversion information can be shared with their members too.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I am concerned about a possible mismatch between the data reported by Highways England and the on-the-ground data and experience of his constituents. Following the previous debate, Highways England was asked to take a look at this. As he knows, it is working with Cambridgeshire County Council to implement speed signs and HGV counters and, as he recognised, it has offered to pay some of the enforcement costs, but it has also taken the trouble to check the calibration of the counters. If there is still a mismatch and the calibration shows a much smaller number—say 20 to 30 vehicles during some hours of the night on some roads, rather than the large build-ups that his constituents are recording—we will have to get to the bottom that. We will be happy to share the data—next week, I hope—and look through that in more detail.

I need hardly say that Cambridgeshire police are also aware of the issues raised and have agreed to check for non-compliance with speed or weight restrictions at key sensitive locations. That is important. Such measures are not necessarily resource intensive, if they are focused and if the effect is to create a sense of uncertainty or concern, which can have a powerful deterrent effect on regular abusers of the traffic system. That said, for operational reasons, this is not always possible, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

The overall commitment to deliver the A14 upgrade on time and within budget remains, but the scheme has been created to ensure that wherever possible local stakeholders’ concerns are at the forefront of the work. The trouble is that in many cases for a period some of the distress felt historically in the villages has been transmuted to the centre of the city, which is unfortunate, but the A14 will in due course serve a wider goal. As I have said, the diversion routes may be required until the open-for-traffic date, programmed for 2020, but the hope is that they will not be.

The traffic data collected by Highways England and residents is a fraction of the many thousands of the HGVs that use the A14 every day, and Highways England is working with Cambridge City Council to improve the weight limit signage, which is also an important part of this. It has assured me that the matter of traffic on diversion routes for subsequent schemes, such as the A428, will be considered in the early stages of the planning process. If that is one tangible result of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, it will have been a valuable one. I thank him for raising this issue.

Question put and agreed to.
Westminster Hall

Monday 29 April 2019

[JOAN RYAN in the Chair]

Online Abuse


4.30 pm

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I draw hon. Members’ attention to the fact that our proceedings are being made accessible for people who are deaf or hearing impaired. The interpreters are using British Sign Language, and parliamentlive.tv will show a live simultaneous interpretation and live subtitling of the debate.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 190627 relating to online abuse.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. The petition was started by Katie Price following the abuse of her son Harvey online. The Petitions Committee set up an inquiry into the subject, throughout which we have been led by the experiences of disabled people. We held an event in Westminster to listen to their experiences and scope out our inquiry, as well as six further events around the country. We took formal evidence from the police, technology companies, charities, the Minister and disabled people themselves, and we published draft recommendations and consulted on them. I think we were the first Select Committee to do so, and we held further events around the country to make that work.

I place on record my thanks to all the people who gave so generously of their time to engage with us, and to the Select Committee staff, who not only worked extremely hard on the inquiry but travelled widely throughout the country to do so. That engagement was very important to us because, despite the fact that other Select Committees have done excellent work on both hate crime and internet safety, we found that the voices of disabled people were often not heard, and that became even clearer to us as the inquiry proceeded.

We found that rather puzzling; after all, disabled people are more likely to be in contact with a range of services—from council services to the Department for Work and Pensions and the health service. They therefore should be easy to contact, although, as one of our witnesses said:

“We’re not hard to reach, only easy to ignore.”

That leads to a misunderstanding of what disabled people are facing online, and what their problems really are.

When we asked both the technology companies and the Minister questions about disabled people, we often got answers about children. The Government’s Green Paper on internet safety said very little about the experiences of disabled people. When we raised that with the Minister, she kindly wrote to us in April last year saying that the Government planned to hold a roundtable with disability organisations and social media companies. The only problem with that is that the inquiry closed in December 2017.

Most disabled people are not children; they are adults who are able to make their own choices and decisions, and they deserve to have their voices heard. What we found out when talking to them was truly shocking. Disabled people are less likely to use the internet than the majority of the population but, among those who do, many are avid users. To be frank, the internet has been a boon to many disabled people. It has allowed them to connect with others with similar conditions, which is very important, especially if they have a rare condition. It has allowed them to widen their social circle, progress in their careers, organise, campaign and challenge stereotypes. However, while doing that, they face the most horrendous abuse—not occasionally, but day in, day out.

Such abuse is, frankly, a stain on our society. Disabled people are regularly told that they should have been aborted. They are targeted with requests for explicit images—the implication being that disabled women, in particular, ought to be grateful for any attention. They are told that they are benefit scroungers or fraudsters, and a drain on our society. That leads to a culture of fear among many disabled people who post about their lives online.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Petitions Committee for giving way. She and I worked together on the report, and I commend her for the speech that she is making. Almost all of us in the Chamber know that people say things online that they would never say directly to someone’s face. However, one of the most distressing aspects of the report—this was shared with me during one of the outreach events that we held in Newcastle—is that the abuse that disabled people receive online often reflects the abuse that they receive out and about in their daily lives in the real world. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as is set out in a conclusion of the report, the Government need to amend hate crime legislation to ensure that disability hate crime is dealt with on a par with other hate crime offences, to send a very clear message?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is entirely right; the disabled people we spoke to were very clear that the abuse that they get online reflects attitudes in society. That is why our report called for more education. We found that 21% of young adults would avoid speaking to a disabled person. Unless we break down those barriers, things will not change. I am sorry that the Government were rather dismissive of that recommendation in their response.
Disabled people were also clear that the abuse had increased since 2010, when certain politicians started to ramp up the rhetoric about benefit fraudsters and scroungers, despite knowing that, even on the worst estimate, benefit fraud is only 1% of the spending. In many estimates, it is less than that. That should be a reminder to everybody that such rhetoric has an impact on real people living their day-to-day lives.

We were clear that part of the way to counter the abuse is to promote more positive images of disabled people. After all, they are 20% of the population, and 19% of the working-age population. They are our friends, neighbours and work colleagues; yet they are seldom visible, either in the media or Government campaigns.

That is why we recommended that the Government ensure that there are positive images of disabled people in all their campaigns, events and advertising.

The Government’s response says that they used a picture of a disabled person in a campaign on transport because disabled people often have problems with transport. It would be an understatement to say that that comprehensively misses the point. We do not want always to see pictures of disabled people who have problems—indeed, sometimes they themselves are seen as the problem. We want to see pictures of disabled people going about their everyday lives at work, at leisure and contributing to society, as they do.

That kind of misunderstanding is everywhere. It leads to a situation in which disabled people who report abuse are often told to go offline. That is as unacceptable in the 21st century as it would be to tell a black person or a disabled person not to go down the high street in case they get abused. When that happens, disabled people face a double whammy: first, their health is damaged by the constant abuse—Members of this House ought to know how that feels—and then they are denied opportunities that would improve their health, in volunteering or in work, and their social circle is narrowed. For those who are in work, constantly having to change their details to avoid abuse leads to loss of employment opportunities or promotion.

We cannot do anything about this problem until we start to understand it, but people do not. For example, we became aware during our inquiry that a lot of the abuse related to football, with people using disability terms as insults. Shockingly and appallingly, they were using the name of Harvey Price, who is a child and a football fan, to insult someone on their ability as a footballer. We wrote to the footballing organisations—the Professional Footballers Association, Kick It Out, the Football Association, the Premier League and the English Football League—but only one replied before our inquiry concluded. The Premier League’s reply was about access to football grounds and abuse at the grounds—it just did not get it. It is shocking that some of those organisations did not reply at all; it is shameful, in fact, because clubs and footballers have a great influence on their fans. I hope that in future they will use their position to call out hatred of disabled people in the same way that they have rightly called out racism associated with the game.

It is that lack of understanding that leads to disabled people being categorised as children and to their voices not being heard. We have therefore recommended that in future the Government should consult disabled people explicitly and directly on all matters that concern them—not those who claim to speak on their behalf, but disabled people themselves.

We were bemused about why social media companies have failed to engage with people who could be among their strongest advocates. What engagement there has been has come too late and has often been too little. For example, where people with learning difficulties are concerned, Facebook told us that it thought its how-to videos made easy-read guidelines unnecessary, while Google said that it thought its community guidelines met the easy-read guidelines. Disabled people disagreed: they do not.

Twitter told us that it thought that simplifying its policies would make them harder to understand, yet easy-read versions are frequently produced of complex documents such as health consultations, tenancy agreements and even—dare I say it—Select Committee reports. It is not that the guidance and expertise needed to produce easy-read versions are not available; it is that social media companies have never thought to seek that guidance and act on it.

We also found that most disabled people, like the rest of us, were confused by the fact that policies are called different things on different sites. Even more importantly, reporting mechanisms are often not accessible to disabled people. Shockingly, we heard again and again that when disabled people have reported hate speech, often nothing has been done.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and is setting out some really unbelievable issues that need to be taken on board and tackled to protect disabled people online and offline. Does she agree that some of the issues result from the fact that the legislation that covers these crimes is so old? I see from the Library briefing that the most recent applicable legislation is from 1997, and some of it goes back to 1861. That is not to say that it is not good or appropriate legislation, but it is clear that our legislative guidelines are so out of date that they cannot take into consideration the modern world and the challenges that disabled people face online.

Helen Jones: The hon. Lady makes a very valid point. I will move on to legislation shortly.

Our inquiry has led us to conclude that social media companies do not employ enough moderators, or enough suitably trained moderators, to deal with this abuse. Given how much profit they are making, that is frankly scandalous. We also found that there is a lot of confusion about what is the responsibility of social media companies and what is the responsibility of the police. That confusion is often fed by the social media companies themselves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): the hon. Lady makes a very passionate and capable speech. Does she agree that perhaps we need someone to be a spokesperson for disabled people online, in a similar way to what has been done for racism and hate crime? Does she feel that perhaps the online companies should set aside a figure
such as 1% of their earnings to address the issue. Maybe it is because online abuse as a result of racism and hate seems to be—use the word very loosely—“sexy”, whereas abuse of disabled people is not. We need someone to be a spokesperson; does the hon. Lady agree that we should set somebody aside for that purpose?

Helen Jones: Whether there should be a particular person charged with that is one issue, but I think disabled people are well able to speak for themselves about this, and have been doing so when people choose to hear them.

Social media companies should certainly do more. For example, we found that Twitter talks about dealing with threats of violence by removing an offending tweet or suspending an account, but nowhere does it say that threats to kill are a serious criminal offence and should be reported to the police. That in itself is breeding confusion. We often found that the police were having to pick up things that should really have been dealt with by social media companies. We think it quite wrong that police resources should have to be used in that way because the social media companies are failing.

Social media companies need clear rules, policies, mechanisms and settings that are accessible to all disabled people. They also need to be much more proactive in removing hate speech from their sites and reporting potential criminal offences, including the theft of images, which was one of the worst things that we found—particularly images of children that were used to create so-called memes or jokes.

Rightly, the Government’s White Paper on online harms commits to imposing a duty of care on social media companies and making them responsible for harmful or illegal content on their sites. However, the document refers repeatedly to “children and other vulnerable users”.

We must understand that many disabled people resent the categorisation of all disabled people as vulnerable. They are not. Like the rest of us, some are vulnerable and some are not. Mostly, they are disadvantaged by how society treats them, rather than by the intrinsic nature of their condition. I hope that the Minister’s reply will reassure us that those things will apply to all kinds of abuse.

What is very clear is that self-regulation has comprehensively failed disabled people in the same way that it has failed many other people who use the internet. Unfortunately, so has the law, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) pointed out. The Government tell us constantly that what is illegal offline is illegal online. That is true as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. There are potentially 30 statutes that could apply to online offences. Some offences, such as the theft of images or instigating pile-ons, can occur only online.

The fact that, as one of our witnesses put it, “not all the pieces of the jigsaw join up” is leading to a low rate of prosecution in this area. If the law cannot deal with the creation of fake child pornography to mock a disabled child and his family, as happened in the case of Harvey Price, it is simply inadequate. We need a new law that is fit for the digital age, which is why we have recommended that the Government bring forward legislation as a matter of urgency and consult disabled people before doing so.

The Government should make disability hate crime an offence in the same way that crime against someone due to their race or religion is an offence. At the moment, it is only an aggravating factor at sentencing, and it is necessary to prove that someone committed a crime because of hostility to someone due to their disability, which is a very high threshold. Both the Crown Prosecution Service and Detective Inspector John Donovan of the Metropolitan police’s online hate crime hub pointed us to the research by the University of Sussex, which shows that disability hate crime was under-reported and under-prosecuted due to the current state of the law.

In their White Paper, the Government include hate crime in a list of harms that they say are clearly defined. I am afraid that it is not clearly defined on disability hate crime, and it urgently needs to be. As our inquiry proceeded, it became clear to us that disabled people do not feel adequately protected by the law, and do not feel that they are heard when they report crimes. People not being heard properly was a recurring theme throughout our inquiry.

Some good work has been done at senior levels of the police and the CPS, but the law will not work properly unless that percolates down through the organisations, and unless the person on the desk in the police station or the officer who comes out to see people understands it. That is why we have recommended more training for police officers, including in dealing with people who have learning disabilities or autism, so that they are not automatically pigeonholed as being unreliable witnesses.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. From the most appalling case in my constituency—the abuse and murder of Lee Irving—I know that so-called mate crime is an enormous danger, particularly for people with learning disabilities. The phrase does not adequately describe in any way the serious financial, physical and often sexual exploitation faced by far too many disabled people at the hands of those they are led to believe are their friends. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that although many disabled people can feel isolated in the real world, the friendships that they develop on social media platforms can actually pose a real danger and harm? Social media companies do not have a grip on this, and the legislation does not reflect the seriousness of such offences.

Helen Jones: I agree. We say in our report that “mate crime is hate crime”, and it should be treated as such. There is a real risk to people from the activities of those vile individuals who target them for exploitation.

We have been asked, and were asked in the petition, whether we thought that a separate register of offenders was necessary for online hate crime. We came to the conclusion that there is no need for a separate register if our suggested changes to the law and to disability hate crime legislation are to be instigated, because those crimes would show up through a normal Disclosure and Barring Service check. We should make it very clear that at the moment, they do not. Often it records the offence but not that it was motivated by hatred of a
disabled person. In organisations that are employing someone to deal with disabled people, there is a problem with being unable to check whether they have a record of not instigating any hate crime. That is a real problem, which we think needs to be addressed by changes in the law.

The other thing that we encountered and felt very strongly about during our inquiry was the fact that disabled people do not feel adequately protected by the law, as I said. We were so concerned that we recommended in our report that the Government should commission an overarching review of disabled people’s experiences of the law, including their experiences of reporting crime and giving evidence.

Disabled people are already marginalised by society. They are being marginalised even more by being abused or driven away from one of the key tools of the 21st century: the internet. That really cannot carry on, and I hope the Minister will commit to consulting disabled people on the proposals in the White Paper, just as I hope she will commit to ensuring that internet and social media companies consult them on their policies, settings and so on. In my view, saying simply that that is an example of good practice is not strong enough. We need to ensure that it will happen, because time and again it is clear that disabled people are not heard when they raise issues that concern them. They are not heard when they talk about this kind of abuse, which they get all the time on the internet. It is time that they were fully heard, and that we grasped this issue and did something about it. I hope the Minister will commit to doing that today.

4.56 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome this debate and am grateful to the Petitions Committee for ensuring that it happened. I endorse a great deal of what the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), the Chair of the Committee, said. I know that she and her fellow Committee members have pursued this issue with great diligence on behalf of the petitioners.

My interest in the matter is that Katie Price, who organised the petition, is a constituent of mine, as is Katie’s mother, Amy, who is watching the debate from the Public Gallery. I have just met Katie and Amy again, having had a number of discussions with them about what motivated them to bring the issue to public attention. The terrible online bullying of Katie’s disabled son, Harvey, and the effect it had on him and on Katie and her family, made her determined to raise the profile of the issue. She was told that, as a public figure, she should expect to take the rough with the smooth, that she should have a thicker skin, that she had asked for trouble through many of the things she had said, and that she therefore had no justification for raising the issue. That seems to miss the point entirely. Whether someone is a public figure, or members of their family are public figures, and whether they have been brought into the public eye by accident or design, it is never justifiable to bully a young person. It is especially unjustifiable to bully a young disabled person who cannot answer back and might be particularly vulnerable to such bullying.

This issue is so important because it draws attention to a new form of bullying and a new means of enabling bullying. Bullying has been around as long as the human race, but it has been enabled, amplified and in many ways made a great deal worse by social media. We all recognise that the law, and the way we deal with the issue, has not kept up with the growth of the problem in our society in recent years. As recently as two decades ago we simply would not have been talking about this as an issue. Online bullying has exploded because of the prevalence of social media. There is a common recognition that we must do something about it; the real question is what?

There are four areas that we must look at, accepting that the problem is very great indeed—we do not need to discuss whether it is or not. The Law Commission has said that “in 2017 28% of UK internet users were on the receiving end of trolling, harassment or cyberbullying.” That is a huge proportion of the population. The question is: how can we deal with it, particularly when it does not cross the line between activity that is clearly criminal and activity that is sub-criminal but nevertheless needs to be dealt with?

Although the Law Commission’s November 2018 report stated that “we do not consider there to be major gaps in the current state of the criminal law concerning abusive and offensive online communications,” it then gave the very important caveat that “there is considerable scope to improve the criminal law in this area”.

It made a number of recommendations on how offences, particularly those relating to grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or false communication, should be tightened up. I hope that the Minister will explain how the Government intend to respond to those recommendations.

The Law Commission noted that there are several practical and cultural barriers to enforcement. That is the second issue. The first is whether the law itself is adequate. Even if the law is correctly framed to deal with online abuse—as I have said, there are areas where it needs improving—the real question is whether it is being effectively enforced. There is little doubt that the law enforcement authorities have struggled with how to deal with the huge explosion of social media. The Law Commission noted: “the sheer scale of abusive and offensive communications, and the limited resources…a persistent cultural tolerance of online abuse”—

I will come to that—the need to balance protecting individuals from harm and freedom of expression; technical barriers that make it difficult to prove the identity of perpetrators; and jurisdictional issues in a highly globalised world. Those are all reasons why it might be hard to enforce the law, but that does not mean that we should not make greater efforts to do so.

I want to raise the question of whether the police are adequately structured, and whether the resources are sufficiently following the need for them to deal with this activity. There is no doubt that crime is changing—this is a very good example of that. The police always need more resources, and I am aware that the Government have recently been increasing police resources, but does the current structure of policing make it easy for individual
forces to deal with issues such as online crime? Would this kind of crime be better dealt with through some kind of collaborative police activity, or even some radically new police organisation at national level? Is it an example of a kind of crime that should make us look again at the structure of policing, even while we maintain individual police forces across the country for other forms of volume crime? It is worth looking at that, because I think there is a capability issue in relation to how the police deal with these problems, as well as a resources issue.

The second point, therefore, is that we must enforce the existing law more effectively, and it must be enforced just as much online as it is offline. The police and prosecutors often have difficult decisions to make about where the line should be drawn and when it is in the public interest to prosecute. They must make those decisions after having investigated these crimes properly. We cannot have a general absence of investigation simply because the issues are so great that the police feel unable to deal with them.

The third area where we need more action is the responsibility of social media companies to police their own platforms. That is clearly today’s zeitgeist. Gone are the days when those companies could simply say that they are merely publishing platforms and that they do not have the ability or the responsibility to deal with offensive conduct. They do. Although much of the focus is on material that poses a serious threat to the public—it is quite proper that social media companies are under enormous pressure to deal with that—they should also not tolerate hateful content any more than a conventional publisher would in their organs.

We are entitled to expect social media companies to do more to deal with the persistent trolling of people and to ensure that reports of such activity are investigated effectively. We must face down those who say that there should be free speech in this area, that we should all have broad shoulders, and that it is not the role of social media companies to act as police officers. Actually, they do have a responsibility in this area. We cannot allow the world wide web to be some kind of wild west where anything goes. The way these platforms are being used is doing great harm, particularly to young people’s mental health and happiness.

Those who are making money out of these immensely popular social platforms—we all use them, and they do bring a lot of pleasure and happiness to millions of people—must also recognise the ways in which they can be abused. They must take action to deal with that. The action they take must address conduct that is not just criminal and dangerous, but hateful. They have a responsibility to act, big though the problem is. The Government’s online harms White Paper is a step in the right direction. I reject those who say that it represents too much interference in free speech. It is about ensuring that the companies behave like responsible publishers and in a way that we would expect newspapers to behave.

The fourth area—I will conclude on this—is talked about less. It relates to civil society itself and our responsibility to encourage a discourse that is civil, respectful and not hateful. All those who lead in society: not least Members of Parliament, must say that there are ways of speaking to people that are no more acceptable simply because it is in an online discussion than they would be if it were a face-to-face discussion. We appear to be living in an angrier society, in which it is acceptable to abuse people, and in which licence is taken with a lot of angry outbursts on social media. It may be true that public figures should have broader shoulders, but when such comments spill over into bullying, particularly of younger people, they should not be tolerated.

We must take action collectively; we cannot just leave it to law enforcement. We cannot just toughen up the law and demand more of law enforcement agencies and social media companies. Those things must happen, but we also have a responsibility in society to take a step back and say, “Actually, some of the ways in which we are discussing issues has gone too far; it is too angry and hateful, and language should be moderated.” People who use excessive language and do not behave in a civilised way should be called out. If we ourselves are not behaving in that way, we cannot call out those who are doing that.

Those are the four areas where action is needed. Action in one area will not be sufficient. This really is not just about changing the law, important though some changes will be. It is not just about law enforcement; it is also about the responsibility of the social media companies and society at large. We will tackle this problem only by acting across the board. Let us not lose sight of the importance of dealing with it.

I pay tribute to Katie for having the courage to raise the issue, for facing down those who have criticised her for doing so, and for securing the Petition Committee’s investigation and report into online abuse. I hope that she keeps going and recognises that she is making progress. Her concern is, although we talk a lot, what progress will be made? That is a legitimate question for any member of the public to ask. We have these debates, but what will actually happen as a consequence?

I will finish by quoting words from Katie’s petition, which are powerful and speak for themselves:

“Help me to hammer home worldwide that bullying is unacceptable whether it’s face to face or in an online space.”

Surely we can all agree with that.

5.10 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I will take a few minutes to talk about the absolutely wonderful work of a rather new organisation called Glitch, which draws attention to the absolute blight of online abuse that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) spoke about so powerfully.

Glitch has highlighted some of the facts that demonstrate how urgent a matter online abuse is. As we all know, last year’s consultation from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport found that four in 10 people had been affected by abuse and that globally, women are 27 times more likely to be affected by abuse, while women of colour face yet more abuse on top of that. Glitch was founded by Seyi Akiwowo, who I am proud to call a friend. I have known her for about 10 years, and first met her at her sixth-form college. She did work experience in my office, and with that experience, became the youngest local councillor in Newham. I am proud to say that she now regularly visits Parliament to talk to us about her experiences and what she does, and also visits other Parliaments and the United Nations.
Glitch was founded because of Seyi’s personal experience and the experiences of many others who have suffered abuse online. Such abuse could easily have driven them out of online spaces entirely; destroyed their mental health; and ended their careers before they had even started. To be honest, that could have happened to Seyi when she first put a tentative toe in the waters of politics. A video of her speaking at the European Parliament was reposted on Twitter and became a magnet for really vile racist and sexist abuse. Seyi is an amazingly talented young black woman who dared to participate, and she was abused online in such an appalling way. She was called the n-word. Obviously, there were death threats. There was appalling misogyny. The trolls absolutely delighted in referring to female genital mutilation, rape, and even lynching. Of course, Seyi was distraught, but being who she is, she decided to do something about it. That was when she learned how poor the support for people who are being abused can be and how long it can take for anyone to do anything about it.

I remember clearly the day that Seyi rang me to let me know what was happening. I remember her calling and telling me how she felt violated and let down. She was so angry, but proud. I remember how I felt: I was absolutely furious, and I was so much more furious about being completely and utterly impotent when I tried to get the abuse taken down. I am a vocal, committed, determined and clear MP. Anybody who has heard me advocate on behalf of constituents knows that I can be clear, yet I could not get that abuse taken off the internet, and it went on for days. My office and I repeatedly phoned Twitter to try to get the trolls taken down.

Seyi was rightly determined not to let that keep happening to others unchallenged, so she founded Glitch and has helped to ensure that the issue that we are discussing is recognised as urgent and receives an urgent response from the Government. Glitch has some clear and sensible asks, three of which I will highlight.

First, Glitch points out that although legal reform through the White Paper on online harms and beyond is welcome, no law will do the job unless it can be enforced. We therefore need a sustained commitment to training and funding our police teams properly so that they can expand the work that they do currently.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Much social media abuse is organised in secret and closed groups. The trolls then dogpile and harass people, and it sometimes takes a physical form, when employers are contacted, for example. The police do not have specialist teams or the legal force to deal with that. Should that not be taken up as part of the legislation?

Lyn Brown: My hon. Friend is right. When I was shadow Minister of State for Policing, I visited police forces that raised that issue, and they talked about how they just do not have the resources to deal with it. They also talked to me about how that type of abuse is totally organised, and it is something that just happens randomly. There are little offline cabals of bad people who collude and conspire together to troll and show hatred, misogyny, racism, you name it—the kind of things that our communities can well do without. Yes, we absolutely need to fund our police and give them the tools that they need to enforce our laws.

Glitch also argues that the prevention of abuse should be put first, which means a digital citizenship education. That is something that Glitch is involved in, to empower young people to interact positively and safely with others online. There is evidence of the impact of that strategy in Australia and from organisations such as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. If the Minister is interested, there is proper evidence out there, and all we have to do is look at what has worked elsewhere, so that we can import the best of it. Frankly, we need it.

Finally, Glitch is one of more than 100 organisations that are campaigning for just 1% of the new digital services tax to be used to support the work of diverse civil society groups. An extra £4 million for that work would not change the face of the internet overnight, but I am sure that we all agree that it would build capacity and world-leading expertise. I honestly think that that would be a great investment in a flourishing digital economy, in healthier communities and in a healthier democracy. I hope that the Minister will respond to those three requests specifically.

Amazing young people like Seyi have grown up with the internet, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North rightly said in her excellent contribution, online spaces are too often filled with abuse that simply would not be tolerated in other public spaces. By treating the online world like the wild west for so long and refusing to get to grips with the difficult questions about regulation, we in this place have let those people down. Online abuse has to stop and we have to stop it.
Online harms, online bullying and bullying of people whether they are disabled, LGBT, women or from our trans community are totally unacceptable. The report produced by the hon. Lady’s Committee is outstanding and I hope that the Government take the recommendations seriously. She went through them in specific detail, but the statement that stood out for me was on the feelings of disabled people about their lack of representation—that we are not hard to find but we are easy to ignore—and it should shame us all that that is how so many disabled people feel.

Hon. Members have referred to intersectionality. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) made particular reference to it, and to the work of Seyi who worked in her office and of Seyi’s company, Glitch. That is particularly stark. I regularly meet members of the LGBT disabled community, and they say that women who are LGBT and disabled are some of the most marginalised people, not just online but offline.

The fact that the Committee consulted tech firms, police and disabled people—across the whole spectrum of stakeholders—is to be commended. The lack of response or the poor response of football teams and that sector in general gives me a sense of deep shame. As the SNP’s digital, culture, media and sports spokesperson, I care passionately about diversity in sport. I am a passionate football fan and occasional player, but it is clear to me that a lot of online abuse comes from football fans. Katie and Harvey have obviously felt that keenly, and it is so disgusting. We absolutely need to get to the heart of that; we need to name and shame those clubs.

To be fair, I know—in particular in Scotland but across the UK—that many clubs do a lot of positive work to tackle abuse and online harm, but we must do more. We must hold teams to account, because clearly many football fans hide behind the guise of their online profiles to spread vile abuse, driving many people offline. They give the vast majority of football fans a bad name—the reality is that the vast majority are peaceful, decent folk who just want to support their team, whether in the stadiums or online.

Poor responses from Government are disappointing, and I want to believe that the Minister and her Government can do better, so while I may disagree with them in many areas and feel let down by them on many counts, their White Paper on online harms was hugely ambitious and a massive step in the right direction. We in the SNP and in the Scottish Government very much support its intentions. We would like to see it go further, and the intentions and the suggestions in the Committee report are particularly significant.

I refer specifically to recommendation 18 of the report, about how "social media companies be required to demonstrate that they have consulted and worked in partnership with disabled people themselves".

The hon. Member for Warrington North spoke passionately about that. I suggest—I wonder whether she and the Minister will consider this—that we talk specifically to those tech firms about quotas in the jobs that do the monitoring and regulating online. I saw a piece in the media fairly recently about how moderators were having a particularly difficult time due to being harmed by the content that they were having to moderate. We all know that in police forces across the UK, people who deal
with online paedophilia, pornography and all those kinds of issues do those jobs for specific periods of time only.

I am not clear how much transparency there is about the profile of moderators and their range of backgrounds, but it stands to reason that if there are more people who are disabled, LGBT and from the BAME community, they will bring their specific perspectives to the moderation of content. That is the same principle that the Government brought forward to get companies to publish their gender pay gaps. Although the legislation had flaws, it has been quite effective from a societal perspective because it has made companies stop and think carefully about what they need to do and the profile of the people they employ. That would be a sensible way forward and something that perhaps we can encourage tech companies to get behind.

The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) paid tribute to his constituents Katie and Harvey Price and Katie’s mother, Amy. Katie has put her head above the parapet. The notion that people in public life, whether celebrities, politicians or whoever else, should just suck it up is a piece of nonsense. As politicians, we deserve to be criticised and critiqued. We expect robust criticism and debate, but we do not expect—and neither should any celebrity or a member of their family—to be routinely abused and persecuted. There has been persecution of Katie and her son Harvey, which cannot continue. I commend her work, and we in the SNP and other across the House will do everything we can to help.

Similarly, as I mentioned in my intervention on the hon. Member for Warrington North, legislation is piecemeal and all over the place. We need to take a holistic look at the legislative framework to make sure that it properly tackles the bullying of disabled people or anyone from any group online and offline. I hope the Minister will take the report seriously. It concerns me that, although Committees of the House do fantastic work and put a huge amount of time and effort into reports, quite often those reports are put on a shelf and left to gather dust. The actions suggested and all the work involved are not taken forward. For the sake of Katie, Harvey and every disabled person or anyone else who is abused online, I hope that this report will not be put on a shelf and left to gather dust. I hope that the Minister will take it very seriously and will enact the sensible recommendations in it.

5.34 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I, too, congratulate Katie Price and her family on bringing forward the petition. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for an outstanding speech to introduce the debate. It was brilliant because it was based on a thorough analysis of the petition. It is good to see the Petitions Committee working in exactly the way that it should.

I do not want to say too much, because our position on how to tackle this problem has been rehearsed with the Minister a number of times over the last year and a half, but there are three or four things that I want to put on the record. First, it is worth remembering that the scale of abuse is staggering. Three quarters of people with learning disabilities and autism say that they have been victims of hate crime. That is a comprehensive failure as a society and a country to keep our neighbours safe. God knows what sacrifices we have made over the last 50 or 60 years in the defence of democracy and free speech. We live in a country where some of our neighbours are hounded out of those privileges; we have to look at ourselves and conclude that we have so much more to do.

The policing environment for online hate is failing comprehensively. There is a very old concept in policing known as keeping the Queen’s peace. Online, the Queen’s peace is simply not observed. I disagree slightly with the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) because it is simply inconceivable ever to expect a police force to police this waterfront. Some time ago, people started producing memes of what goes up online every 60 seconds. As far back as 2017, the statistics were half a million tweets, 500 hours of video and 3.3 million Facebook posts. There is no way any police force on earth will police that waterfront and keep it safe and sound to protect and preserve the Queen’s peace throughout that space. Therefore, we have to put the onus back on some of the most profitable companies on earth.

In the last reported quarter, Facebook made something like £5 billion of net earnings. That means that in the course of this debate, it will have made more than £3 million of profit. It is one of the biggest and most valuable companies on earth, yet it gets away with supporting—not orchestrating or colluding in, but certainly enabling—the abuse of fellow citizens of our society. The time has to come when we say to the wealthiest titans on earth, “Enough is enough.”

Nick Herbert: The right hon. Gentleman should not traduce what I said. I was quite clear that action needed to be taken across the board, and that social media companies had to accept responsibility. I did not say or seek to imply that the police could police the range of abusive comments across social media. Where they trespass into the criminal, law enforcement agencies do have a responsibility to act, and we need to ensure that they are capable of doing so.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful for that because I believe we are on the same page. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the police forces in this country will need to be radically reconfigured. The time when a police constable might turn up to a burglary and advise how to target harden the home should be about to go, because the cyber-security of the property and the family in question will often be much more important. At the moment, however, in Birmingham we cannot get police to investigate even violent abuses because there are no police—they have been cut in the west midlands to the smallest number since the force was created in 1974. That is a debate for another day.
Four significant changes need to happen to the online regulatory and policing environment. I think the Government have accepted the first: there needs to be a duty of care on social media companies. The concept of duty of care is quite well established in law. Its legal tradition goes back to the early 1970s and it is tried and tested. If I went out and built a stadium here in London and filled it full of people, there would be all kinds of rules and regulations that would ensure that I kept those people safe. If I went out and built a similar online stadium and filled it full with all kinds of nonsense, no such regulations would bite on me. That has to change. We have to ask these firms to identify the harms their services and products might cause and to do something about them, and we have to hold them to account for that.

The second idea is much tighter regulation of hate speech, which the Government have not yet accepted the need to look into. We have raised a number of times in debates like this the approach taken by the Ministry of Justice in Germany. Its Network Enforcement Act—or NetzDG law for short—has created a much more effective policing environment for tackling online hate speech, and it has done so in a way that keeps Germany well within its Council of Europe obligations on protecting free speech. It is time we looked at that because, as the report that has come through from the German Ministry of Justice shows, it is beginning to work.

I am told that something like one in seven Facebook moderators now works in Germany. Google, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have had to take down a significant amount of hateful material. Looking across the Council of Europe space at the countries that are signatories to the European convention on human rights, which includes the protection of free speech, it appears that Germany is leading the way in creating an effective policing environment to tackle hate speech. Surely, it is time for the Government to look at that a little harder.

The third thing we need is a different kind of regulator. Again, I think the Government have accepted that. There are something like nine different regulators with some kind of regulatory, policing or overwatch powers in the internet space. That is too many. We are not saying they need to be boiled down to one, but that number needs to be closer to one than to nine. That means we have to overhaul the regulators, so we are looking forward to seeing a new Bill whenever we see the Queen’s Speech and a new legislative programme for the next Session.

The final change we need, which is more long term, is a bill of digital rights for the 21st century. The reality is that the online world is going to be regulated, re-regulated and re-regulated again over the course of this century. It is therefore important that we set down some first principles that provide something of a north star to guide us and give companies a bit more predictability as we navigate the changes ahead. At the core of that bill of digital rights should be the right to universal digital literacy. Ultimately, as a country, we are all going to have to become more digitally literate so we can start putting back in place some of the norms and boundaries of the civilised discourse that once were the hallmark of democracy in this country.

5.42 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the Petitions Committee on its impressive work. I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her speech and for leading that work on the Committee’s report. I assure her that the Government take this issue extremely seriously. I echo her thanks and congratulations to Katie Price and her family on the crusading work they have done. They should never have had to do it in the first place, but they were courageous enough to confront these awful issues on behalf of her son, Harvey.

I have been very affected by the things I have heard in the debate. I had heard some of them before, but some of the content of the debate was new to me, and it is all very shocking. The purpose of the debate has been to look at the effect of horrendous abuse on people with disabilities. Although, obviously, it has not been confined to people with disabilities, until this petition and the Committee’s report, there had not been enough exposure of the true extent of the abuse of people with disabilities.

The hon. Lady alluded to the advice to go offline, which seems to have been handed out to many people with disabilities who have been abused online. That is outrageous advice. No, they should not go offline. She made clear the tremendous benefits that the internet has brought people with disabilities. They should be free to access those benefits, and to come and go online like everybody else, without fear of harassment, abuse or intimidation. It is the internet that has to change, not the experience of people with disabilities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) has done an excellent job representing the Price family, who are his constituents. He is quite right that this awful abuse and bullying has been with us since the dawn of humanity, but unfortunately, since the dawn of the internet, which is a recent phenomenon, it has been amplified and made far worse.

The 24/7 nature of the internet, and the speed and ease with which images and abusive content can be replicated around the world at the touch of a button, have made the phenomenon of abuse—we are here to talk particularly about the abuse of people with disabilities—far worse. I quite agree that social media platforms should operate a policy of zero tolerance of hate speech, and I will come on to the steps that we are taking through the online harms White Paper to ensure that they do that.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned something I know very well: that women are 27 times more likely than men to receive abuse online. There is a lot of research to back that up. I echo her congratulations to her constituent Seyi and the campaign organisation she founded, Glitch. That was a very courageous move to overcome the awfulness of what she had to cope with online and actually do something about it. If we are going to do something about abuse, we have to confront it, so I congratulate Seyi.

Some of the proposals that Glitch has developed on digital citizenship and digital literacy are very important. There is a section in our White Paper devoted to improving digital literacy, and not just among young people but among the general population—for us all—and particularly with regard to children as they are growing up. That is very important. The hon. Member for West Ham suggested that the proposed measures could be funded from the digital services tax. I am sure that we can ask the Chancellor those questions, but the White Paper proposes that the regulator should be funded via a levy on companies, which would be a similar source of income.
Lyn Brown: I am delighted to hear what the Minister has just said, and I know that Glitch will be, too. Should she launch a quiet campaign—we know that is how politics is often done—in the Treasury and DCMS to ask for better enforcement and whether we can take a percentage of the money from the digital services tax, she will find that she has friends on the Labour Benches, and we will do our best to give more power to her elbow.

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady very much for her support. It is very important that we work across parties in this area. We have welcomed the Labour party’s input to these deliberations, and some of the ideas that it put forward found their way into the White Paper.

Hannah Bardell: I will follow on from that intervention, because the Minister will also find friends on the SNP Benches. It is important that we work cross-party to challenge the big tech firms. Given that a former Member of this place is now in a very senior role in Facebook, I would like to think that it understands and appreciates the strength of feeling on this issue across the House. Only by working cross-party and taking on the tech companies head on will we get them to get in line and get this sorted.

Margot James: I agree; a cross-party approach is much more powerful. We want to spend our time not arguing across the Floor of the House, but on confronting the tech companies with the responsibility that they should bear, and on representing and championing citizens, who deserve better.

The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock—[Interruption.] I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant)—I clearly need to know my Scottish constituencies better. I apologise to both hon. Members. I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and for the outrage he expressed on behalf of his constituents.

The SNP spokesperson is the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). I share her shock that the majority of football authorities did not even deign to respond to the letters from the Petitions Committee demanding that they become part of the solution against the horrendous level of abuse that seems to emanate from the world of football. Sadly, racism in football has still not been dealt with, but at least they are engaged in tackling that. I will speak to the Minister for Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), to seek her support to get the football authorities to engage on the abuse of disabled people.

Hannah Bardell: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I do not think that the Petitions Committee wrote to any clubs or authorities in Scotland—I make no criticism; that is just an observation. I would be happy to help facilitate contact with them, and I suggest that a copy of the Committee’s report should go to every football club in the United Kingdom, along with a letter calling them to a meeting where we have cross-party representation at which we can eyeball them and tell them just how strongly people in this House feel about their clubs and the action they need to take.

Margot James: That is an excellent suggestion. I am happy to put that to my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport, and if the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Warrington North, who chairs the Petitions Committee, would like to attend that meeting, we will set that up. Yes, we will definitely invite all football authorities to that meeting.

The hon. Member for Warrington North also talked about the effect on moderators. Thousands of people and now employed by tech companies to moderate content and make decisions on whether it crosses the threshold and should be taken down. We are looking more and more to systems of artificial intelligence to do as much of that job as possible, precisely for the reasons she set out. It is a horrendous job to do, and I imagine that over time it ends up affecting the moderators’ mental health. On a positive note, 75% of the 4 million videos that YouTube has taken down in, I think, the past six months were identified and removed via artificial intelligence. That does offer us some hope for the future.

Liam Byrne: The Minister is being generous. The only danger with introducing such statistics, which all the social media companies are desperate to put into our hands, is that it creates the impression that somehow they are doing enough when they are not. We will never get to a solution to this problem by relying on voluntary action. That is why the law needs to change, and enforcement needs to change.

Margot James: I certainly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I am sorry if I gave that impression; I wanted to offer up some hope that over time more and more solutions for removal will be technological so that moderators, who have a terrible job to do, do not have to spend their working lives wading through this horrendous content. To clarify, that is absolutely not at all to say that companies are doing enough. They are doing more, but it is by no means enough as yet.

Helen Jones: One thing that tech companies need to do, as the police, GCHQ and other authorities do, is provide regular counselling for the people who have to deal with such appalling content. At the tech companies, moderating is often done by poorly paid people in very poor countries, and no support is provided for them.

Margot James: The hon. Lady makes a good point; people would need that. I believe more and more counselling is being offered, but I am not aware of whether that offer is consistent across the industry or provided only by the better-performing companies.

I reassure the hon. Lady that the Government have engaged with disability organisations and will continue to do so. Last year I held a roundtable with organisations focused specifically on online abuse of people with disabilities, and next month I will chair a roundtable focusing on adults with learning disabilities. I really am very sorry if the Government have given the impression that we think these problems are confined to children and young people, because they most certainly are not, as the hon. Lady said eloquently in her speech. I completely agree. In fact, the organisations with whom I had the roundtable mostly represented adults, and the next one
will be mostly about young adults with learning disabilities. That is what I will do to follow up the debate and the petition.

I want to say a few words about the online harms White Paper. I reiterate my earlier point that self-regulation has failed—the shadow Minister is right about that. We all agree on that, and that is why the Government will establish a new statutory duty of care to make companies take more responsibility for the safety and security of their users and tackle the harm caused by the content and activity on their services. Compliance with the duty of care will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator. Companies will be held to account for tackling a comprehensive set of online harms, including behaviours that may or may not be illegal but none the less are highly damaging to individuals and threaten people’s rights online. The Government are consulting on the most appropriate enforcement powers for a regulator.

[Interruption.]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, who is a former Policing Minister, mentioned the structure of policing and whether there are capability as well as resource issues. I should have mentioned that the White Paper is in fact a joint Home Office and DCMS White Paper. We have therefore had input from Home Office Ministers, and I will raise his point with them. [Interruption.] I am somewhat distracted by a lot of noise—I do not know where it is coming from.

Ian Austin: They are cheering you on, Minister. Take it while you can.

Margot James: I see that we have had a change of Chair. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as well, Mr Austin.

Coming back to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, we intend that the new system of regulation will take some of the burden off the police and place it on to the tech companies. Those companies should be accountable for taking care of their users by eliminating such content, hopefully before it comes online but certainly very swiftly after it is reported.

The law in Germany, which the shadow Minister mentioned, is that the law is in fact a joint Home Office and DCMS White Paper. We have therefore had input from Home Office Ministers, and I will raise his point with them. [Interruption.] I am somewhat distracted by a lot of noise—I do not know where it is coming from.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, who is a former Policing Minister, mentioned the structure of policing and whether there are capability as well as resource issues. I should have mentioned that the White Paper is in fact a joint Home Office and DCMS White Paper. We have therefore had input from Home Office Ministers, and I will raise his point with them. [Interruption.] I am somewhat distracted by a lot of noise—I do not know where it is coming from.

Ian Austin: They are cheering you on, Minister. Take it while you can.

Margot James: I see that we have had a change of Chair. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as well, Mr Austin.

Coming back to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, we intend that the new system of regulation will take some of the burden off the police and place it on to the tech companies. Those companies should be accountable for taking care of their users by eliminating such content, hopefully before it comes online but certainly very swiftly after it is reported.

The law in Germany, which the shadow Minister referred to, requires content to be taken down within 24 hours of companies knowing about it; if it is later than that, swingeing fines can be applied. We want to create an environment in which companies deal with matters themselves and use less and less of our valuable policing time for the privilege.

As I mentioned earlier, we have committed to developing a media literacy strategy—one of the proposals made by Glitch—to ensure that we have a co-ordinated and strategic approach to online media literacy education. We have published a statutory code of practice for social media providers about dealing with harmful contact, and we have consulted on the draft code with a variety of stakeholders, including people with disabilities. The code includes guidance on the importance of social media platforms having clear, accessible reporting processes and accessible information on their terms and conditions, highlighting the importance of consulting users when designing new software, new apps and new safety policies.

There has been some discussion about whether the law itself is adequate, particularly with regard to hate crime. I will say a few words about the Law Commission’s review. In February last year the Prime Minister announced that the Law Commission would undertake a review of current legislation on offensive communications to ensure that laws are up to date with technology. The Law Commission completed the first part of its review and published a report at the end of last year. It engaged with a range of stakeholders, including victims of online abuse, the charities that support them, legal experts and the Government. The report concluded that abusive communications are theoretically criminalised to the same or even greater degree than equivalent offline behaviours—I did not necessarily accept that verdict myself—but practical and cultural barriers mean that not all harmful online conduct is pursued through criminal law enforcement to the same extent that it is in an offline context. I think the consensus in this room is that that is definitely the case.

The Government are now finalising the details of the second phase of the Law Commission’s work. The Law Commission has been asked to complete a wide-ranging review of hate crime legislation in order to explore how to make hate crime legislation more effective, including whether it is effective in addressing crimes targeting someone because of their disability. I urge Members present and organisations that might be taking an interest in this debate to give their input to the review.

Liam Byrne: Before the Minister finishes, I am grateful for the opportunity to ask her whether she thinks that the Law Commission’s work is going to finish in time to allow her to bring a Bill before the House in the next Session.

Margot James: I am afraid that I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. We are not sure when the next Session will commence, but I fear that the timing of the second phase of that work means that it will not be carried out in time to form the basis of much-needed changes to the law, which I hope the Law Commission will propose. We might have to wait until the following Session. Having said that, the Law Commission might have an opportunity to provide some interim results from its inquiries, and there is nothing to stop an hon. Member introducing a private Member’s Bill, should the opportunity arise, to look closely at the subject and bring something forward for debate.

This review of hate crime is very necessary. One of today’s contributions mentioned the fact that hate crime is aggravated by certain characteristics, including disability, but that might not go far enough. These matters and a review of hate crime are part of the remit of the second phase of the Law Commission’s work. I will also be suggesting to the Law Commission that it looks at the issue of online gender-based hate crime. As the hon. Member for West Ham mentioned, a significant amount of online abuse is misogynistic—it devalues women, it degrades them sexually and it amounts to gender-based hatred. There is a powerful case for women to be afforded the same legal protection against misogynistic online abuse as that given to people with other protected characteristics over which they have no control.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their thoughtful contributions and the Petitions Committee for the huge amount of work it has done on this vital subject. I look...
forward to continued engagement from across the House as we develop the proposals set out in the online harms White Paper.

6.6 pm

Helen Jones: I thank all the Members who have spoken this afternoon for their useful contributions to the debate, and their suggestions for going further with the task. I know that the Minister takes the matter extremely seriously. However, some of the changes to the law that are required are of course not within her Department. I hope that she will convey to the Home Office the strength of feeling from the debate, particularly about the need to strengthen the legislation on disability hate crime.

There were useful suggestions about, for example, making sure that the people employed by technology companies are diverse and understand the issues, and about ways of looking at digital citizenship education. All those suggestions were welcome and I am sure that the Petitions Committee will do follow-up work and take them into account. However, we need changes in the law. The online harms White Paper is a useful step in the right direction, but other changes are also needed. I might make a comparison with a number of other issues that we have dealt with in the past: sometimes the law follows changes in society, but sometimes the law itself changes people’s perceptions. The Race Relations Act 1965 did not get rid of racism but at least it stopped some of its overt manifestations. It used to be considered acceptable to drink several pints and get behind the wheel of a car, but it is not any longer, because the law changed. Sometimes we need changes in the law to lead people to change their attitudes. That is what we are asking for in the present case.

We also need, as some hon. Members said, to make sure that the police have the right technology and skills, and the right number of people to make sure that the law is enforced. Digital companies must bear their responsibility; that is exactly right, as the Minister said.

However, when a crime is committed the police need the resources to pursue the crime and bring people to justice for it.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and to the Minister for what she has said today. I want to mention, again, that the police service in my constituency has had major difficulties in trying to get offensive drill music taken down. It was being used by gang members to call each other out; it was inciting violence on the street. The police tell me that despite the fact that they asked YouTube to take the videos down it did not happen, and that they did not have enforcement powers. We need the powers to do what is right. We need to give our police not only the resources they need but the powers they need to keep children safe.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Today’s debate is perhaps an example of how debates should be conducted in the House—civilly, and with useful contributions—and it has been clear that there is support across the House for change. Most of all, we have to be clear that we are changing attitudes and that things that have previously been considered acceptable, at least by some sections of society, are not acceptable. We have to make sure that the concerns of disabled people and others are finally heard and attended to. They have not been heard in the past and I hope that we have changed that today, and that we shall go on to ensure that the law is changed so they no longer feel excluded.

Ian Austin (in the Chair): Before we proceed, we should all thank the sign language interpreters, who have been ensuring that everyone is fully able to follow what has been said in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered e-petition 190627 relating to online abuse.

6.10 pm

Sitting adjourned.
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am glad to have secured this crucial debate, which gives me and my east midlands colleagues a great opportunity to highlight the healthcare crisis in our constituencies, our region and across the country. I must stress in everything I say that I do not blame the hard-working and dedicated staff for any of it; the fault lies fairly and squarely with Government cuts. Our constituents deserve better than the past decade of under-funding, which has created a postcode lottery in local healthcare. It has had particularly detrimental implications for my constituency of Lincoln: local healthcare centres have been forced to shut, more general practitioners’ services are at risk of closure in the coming months, and local hospitals are in need of considerable funding and support.

Our healthcare infrastructure in the surrounding region of Lincolnshire has also been put under considerable pressure over the past nine years. In July last year, the chief inspector of hospitals recommended that United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust, which has a deficit estimated at £80 million, should remain in special measures. The latest figures show that the trust missed its A&E waiting time target by 32% and has not met the national standard since September 2014.

The east midlands reflects the national picture of a health service in crisis. The Government have spent nine years running down the NHS by imposing the biggest funding squeeze in its history, with massive cuts to public health services. Social care has been slashed by £7 billion since 2010. Our NHS is short of 100,000 staff, including 41,000 nurses and nearly 10,000 doctors. This has had a detrimental knock-on effect on performance: waiting lists are at 4.3 million, more than 500,000 patients are waiting more than 18 weeks for treatment, and 2.5 million people are waiting for more than four hours in A&E. That is a crisis.

It is clear that the underfunding, privatisation and inadequate staffing of our health service has had a devastating effect on healthcare provision in Lincoln and the east midlands. Government decisions have had terrible consequences for people who need care in the areas that I and many of my colleagues represent. That is typified by the recent announcement that the highly relied-on Skellingthorpe surgery may close.

For those who do not know it, Skellingthorpe is a beautiful village in my constituency. Its doctors surgery provides healthcare to more than 8,000 patients, many of whom are local residents. The national patient survey found that 81.9% of the surgery’s patients felt that their overall experience was good or very good. The Glebe Practice, which runs the surgery, is in the process of proposing its closure to the clinical commissioning group, and the practice’s patients are centralised in its Saxilby surgery. I acknowledge that there are pressures on the service—there could not fail to be, given the Government’s cuts—and that the practice is struggling to recruit clinicians, so centralising its service in Saxilby allows it to maintain quality in one surgery. However, centralising the service restricts my constituents’ access to care. They have told me that it is already very difficult to book a timely GP appointment there.

As many other hon. Members will know from their own constituencies, rural areas are often inaccessible because of limited transport links. If the Glebe Practice’s plan to transfer patients to its Saxilby practice is agreed to, it will mean patients having to travel on public transport—remember, not everybody can drive or has a car—or walk for 90 minutes from the Skellingthorpe surgery. Even the closest surgery is about a 40-minute walk away. Imagine elderly people having to walk for 40 minutes!

This is a shocking downgrade of my Skellingthorpe constituents’ access to care. The proposed alternatives do not offer an acceptable journey length to patients who are in need of health services. Many patients may struggle with mobility issues because of age or illness, while others may not be able to afford to travel other than by public transport.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech that sets out the challenges to healthcare in rural areas such as Lincolnshire. Just this week, the wound service in one of our local clinics in High Peak has shut. Elderly patients with open wounds are having to travel for four hours each way, on three buses, to access the clinic that they are supposed to go to. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is absolutely unacceptable?

Karen Lee: Yes, I do. I hope that everybody in this Chamber would agree that that is really unacceptable.

Rather than reducing access to one-to-one healthcare, we should be outlining how we can help groups such as the Glebe Practice by implementing effective national programmes that incentivise recruitment in rural areas. There is a major workforce crisis: as a report co-authored by the Nuffield Trust, the King’s Fund and the Health Foundation has found, the NHS could be short of 7,000 GPs within five years. Rural areas will be the first to be hit. As access to GP services in the east midlands is reduced, I urge the Minister to take action to address the staffing crisis.

Before the surgery closes, Lincolnshire West CCG intends to hold a public consultation—but the people of Lincoln have been there before, very recently. Lincoln’s walk-in centre on Monks Road closed last year after an allegedly meaningful public consultation, 94% of respondents to which were opposed to the closure. Protests were held outside Lincoln County Hospital and along the high street. Both Conservative-led Lincolnshire County Council and Labour-controlled City of Lincoln Council formally objected to the closure, as did I, but not a bit of notice was taken—the centre was still closed. The justification was similar to the one being given now for the Skellingthorpe closure: we were told that there would be sufficient alternative provision to ensure the same level of care. After researching that claim, we found that no substitution would come anywhere near the accessibility of the walk-in centre, so I am afraid that my constituents’ faith in any local consultation is pretty limited.
Appointmtonly slots will not meet the needs of my constituents who rely on short-notice, timely access to care. Inevitably, they will only add to the pressure on the overworked A&E department at Lincoln County Hospital and East Midlands ambulance service.

I am very concerned that a trend is emerging: the implementation of cuts to healthcare services, in direct opposition to local people’s wishes and needs. It is deeply worrying that CCGs are not listening to residents’ concerns before closing local health services. I completely acknowledge that there have been sustained budgetary pressures on the healthcare system over the past nine years, and that it is the CCGs that are expected to deliver large-scale cuts, but in a transparent health governance system we cannot allow cuts to be rubber-stamped against such clear local opposition.

I ask the Minister to consider these cases and contact me to provide substantial reasoning to explain why another closure in my constituency is considered acceptable. The information that I and my constituents have been afforded has led us to the opinion that neither the walk-in centre nor the Skellingthorpe surgery should have been considered for closure. I am sorry, Minister, but passing the buck to the CCG is not good enough for my constituents.

It is not just local GP practices and health centres that have been put under debilitating pressure over the past decade. In my constituency, Lincoln County Hospital serves the city of Lincoln and the north Lincolnshire area. Due to funding and staffing pressures, the latest Care Quality Commission inspection has found that Lincoln County Hospital is below the national standard and requires improvement. It is important to stress that, as is the case in hospitals throughout the UK, this substandard performance is in no way the fault of the dedicated and hard-working staff. I speak from experience: when I was a nurse there, we often used to stay up to an hour late. In theory we got our time back, but in practice we did not.

The staff give a lot—it is not their fault. I worked as a nurse at Lincoln County Hospital for 14 years and I know how much energy and care all the staff from porters to doctors, put into their challenging work. That is supported by the CQC report, which concluded that the hospital requires improvement in four out of five areas: safety, effectiveness, responsiveness and management. The only area rated as good was the caring nature of the hospital. As the report states repeatedly:

“Patients were treated with compassion, dignity and respect.”

I pay credit to the hard-working staff for that, but they are being let down by a Government who have consistently neglected our health services. I have been through their cuts myself.

The inspection found that nurse staffing numbers were often insufficient to keep people protected from avoidable harm and that the hospital relied heavily on agency and locum staff. I know that at first hand: my friends who are still nurses tell me that that is true even now. The most worrying was the fact that inadequate levels of nurses were observed on only four of the 28 days that the CQC reviewed. It is hardly surprising that there are such drastic staffing shortages. Since 2010, there has been a 19% real-terms fall in weekly earnings for full-time nurses. Nursing degree applications have dropped by one third since the Government scrapped nursing bursaries, without which I would not have been able to train. I go on and on about the nursing bursary, and I will not stop. We need to bring it back; we will not have enough nurses until we do.

The Health Foundation has also found that the number of nurses quitting because of a poor work-life balance almost tripled between 2011 and 2018. Our NHS staff should be celebrated and supported. Their kindness and commitment should not be taken advantage of by a Government who strip away the security of their profession. Lincoln County Hospital demonstrates the devastating way in which avoidable staffing shortages affect vulnerable patients in our communities.

The CQC report also found that patients could not always access care and treatment in a timely way. Waiting times were worse than the England average and did not meet the national standard. Some 60% of ambulance handovers were delayed by 30 minutes or more, and 47% of patients in A&E waited longer than the recommended 15 minutes to be triaged. I went out with an ambulance crew about a year ago, and I saw that at first hand.

That shows how hard-working, committed NHS staff in Lincoln are being put under intolerable pressure by decisions made in Whitehall. That is not unique to Lincoln. In July last year, England’s chief inspector of hospitals recommended that United Hospitals Lincolnshire NHS Trust should remain in special measures after visits to Lincoln County Hospital, Pilgrim Hospital, County Hospital Louth and Grantham and District Hospital. Pilgrim Hospital in Boston, which serves my constituents, is a particularly worrying case. It received an overall rating of “inadequate” in this year’s CQC inspection. The report found that there was no allocated corridor nurse. Corridor nurse—really? Should people be in corridors on trolleys? One nurse was caring for up to 21 patients at one time. When I was a nurse, the average was about six or eight. On a bad day, if someone did not come in, it could be 10 or 12, but 21—really?

It is clear that at the local, regional and national level, healthcare provision is not working. Vulnerable people who need care in Lincoln, the east midlands and across the UK have a right to access the health provision that they need. That requires a properly funded and staffed NHS service, from local GPs to county hospitals. Although I welcome the Government’s planned funding increase for the NHS, most health experts agree that it is barely enough to keep the NHS afloat, let alone reverse nine years of severe funding cuts. Areas such as Lincoln and the east midlands need and deserve much more than a plan that will barely keep afloat a system operating on a shoestring budget.

As someone whose job used to be to provide local healthcare, I am lifted by the fact that everyone can access healthcare as a human right in this country, but that universal right is threatened by policies that do not enable an effective health service in which everyone can access care based on their need, not on the austere policy decisions of the Government of the day.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 11 o’clock. We have got almost an hour of Back-Bench time, so there is no pressure, but the Chair will be particularly generous to any Member who wants to dilate at length on the need for an urgent care hub at Kettering General Hospital.

9.43 am

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for allowing me to speak first. I think it is the first time I have heard a Chair say that there is no time constraint, but I will not detain the House for too long. At the risk of being called to order, I had planned to raise the work that you have done for Kettering General Hospital and your impassioned demands for improvements to it over the years, which no doubt the Minister has listened to many times. I was with some friends last week who said, “Ah, Northamptonshire. That’s the Bones—Peter and Philip—isn’t it?” Kettering General Hospital came up. At the risk of being called to order—I do not see you doing that—let me say what a good job you have done for that hospital. As was said in the Chamber this week, your whole identity in the House is linked to the work you have done there.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing not just half an hour but an hour and a half in what used to be called the Grand Committee Room but is now Westminster Hall. She spoke passionately and with detailed knowledge, as a former nurse, about the problems in her area. I listened to her speech, and I have sympathy with what she said about some of the consolidation that has taken place, but inevitably there have to be some changes and rationalisations in the health service.

I will talk mainly about the changes in the great town of Hinckley, in my west Leicestershire constituency of Bosworth, which is some way from Lincoln. We were very fortunate that the Secretary of State himself—ipsa—recently came to Hinckley to look at the changes that will be made thanks to the £8 million grant that has been secured for upgrading the facilities in Hinckley. Mayur Lakhani, the chair of the West Leicestershire clinical commissioning group, spoke warmly about the way the Secretary of State had responded to their bid, and the support of Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council, which happens to be Conservative-controlled, and which I will refer to later.

I was lucky to be elected to this House a long time ago—in fact, so long ago that I sometimes forget the date. I have been a Member for more than 30 years, and the one health issue that has bedevilled my constituency above all others in that period is what to do with the Mount Road hospital—the old hospital in the middle of Hinckley. Because of the £8 million grant that the Secretary of State awarded to the clinical commissioning group, we are now able to make some substantial changes to the health improvements in Hinckley. Given your interest in Kettering General Hospital, Mr Hollobone, you will understand my joy at seeing the improvements that are about to take place—consultations are going on at the moment.

I have a letter from the West Leicestershire clinical commissioning group setting out exactly where we are now. It says that the investment supports plans to provide modern, fit-for-purpose facilities, and more services in the local community and closer to home in Hinckley. I say to the hon. Member for Lincoln that part of that will be about shutting down old facilities. One is a portakabin and another is the old hospital. In exchange, the investment will make better use of all available existing space in Hinckley Health Centre on Hill Street, not far from the old hospital, and Hinckley and Bosworth Community Hospital, which we call Sunnyside because it is on a hill and gets the sun all day long—it is a marvellous place for a hospital.

As part of the £8 million package, the Hinckley Health Centre will be refurbished to accommodate X-ray, ultrasound and physiotherapy, and to increase the number of consulting rooms, which is extremely important. Out-of-hours primary care services will be relocated from Hinckley and Bosworth Community Hospital—Sunnyside—to the newly developed urgent care hub in the Hinckley Health Centre, which will provide out-of-hours urgent care for local patients. A combined day case surgery and endoscopy unit with day case beds will be created. That will provide an increased range of day case procedures and cancer screening services for local patients. We will be removing services from the old Hinckley and District Hospital and the physiotherapy portakabin, which are unfortunately not fit for purpose, and physiotherapy services will be relocated to Hinckley Health Centre.

As I have the luxury of time, I say to people who have campaigned for years to save the old Hinckley and District Hospital that as it is such an old building, upgrading the hospital to the highest standards would require a phenomenal amount of work at a very high cost, with a low return on investment because all the special cables now have to be run with special conduits for oxygen and monitoring. It simply cannot be done efficiently in such an old structure. Although many of my constituents will have an emotional attachment to the old hospital, the decision that has been taken by the clinical commissioning group is right: it needed to close. In exchange, we are now getting an £8 million grant, which will provide much better facilities. As I mentioned earlier, some of the facilities are coming into the town from the outskirts—from Sunnyside to the health centre. It is quite an achievement.

We were lucky to get the grant of £8 million. My father always said to me that you generate your own luck in life, which is true. In this case, one of the drivers that made it possible for the Department and Secretary of State to agree to the clinical commissioning group’s bid was the extraordinary co-operation in west Leicestershire between the different service providers, particularly in Hinckley in my constituency.

At the beginning of the 2005 Parliament, I was lucky enough to get elected to the Health Committee under the new procedures. Subsequently, I chaired it for a short time. When I was elected to the Committee, I asked the then leader of the council, “Would you like me to come and talk about health on a regular basis?” It was agreed that I would, and that developed into a health and wellbeing partnership, which meets quarterly with the clinical commissioning group; the director of public health for Leicestershire County Council, Mike Sands; and senior officers at Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council, including Bill Cullen, Simon Jones, Councillor Maureen Cook and many other excellent Conservative councillors over time. We also have doctors from the local surgeries attend.
Over a period of some years, we saw the meeting change from participants sitting with their arms folded and leaning back, to sitting up and listening attentively. We have learned to work together, and the partnership has been leakproof—there is nothing to gain from talking outside. We have had an extraordinary degree of co-operation, and I am absolutely convinced that it has improved the health services in my constituency and the county as a whole. It has reduced costs and brought up a whole a range of new ideas, some of which I shall go through today. The work of the secondary provider, Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council, has been really remarkable and hugely encouraging, and it is something that all local people in my constituency can be proud of. Leicestershire County Council has done a good job, too, but I am particularly proud of what Hinckley and Bosworth has done through its health and wellbeing partnership—its contribution to health delivered through that partnership.

It might be instructive if I run through some of the areas that Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council has worked on. I am pleased to see the Minister of State in his place rather than a Parliamentary Under-Secretary; he is the deputy of the Secretary of State. It illustrates how seriously the Government take the issue of health funding in the east midlands. I want to share with him what is going on in Hinckley. First, I reiterate that we have a local delivery of preventive services through co-operation. I mentioned the councils, but we also talk to the voluntary and community sector. We have patient participation groups, school participation groups and elderly patient participation groups.

The information pyramid is broad-based, and the lines of communication are fluid. Information can come from the bottom to the top very easily. From those ideas, the Conservative-controlled Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council has produced a comprehensive prevention strategy, which sets out the work that the authority will undertake with its partners. The first objective is to prevent issues from escalating by taking action as early as possible. The second is to reduce demand for high-cost services and dependency on statutory services, thereby making spending more efficient.

Another objective is to develop self-help approaches to enable communities to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, which is something that the Department of Health and Social Care worked on under the Secretary of State’s predecessor, and the Health Committee in the 2005 Parliament looked at personal budgets and how they work. It was about getting people to think about their own health. With an ageing population, that is one of the areas that really must be brought to the fore in the future. However much money we ask for the NHS, we will never have enough supply of resources to meet demand unless we encourage people to take greater care of themselves. In this respect, the initiatives that Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council has taken are hugely important in encouraging people to do that.

I will come on to what the council has done in a moment, but the overall aim of the strategy is to ensure that, together with all key partners, the community—and communities—especially people who are most at risk—to keep safe, keep well, stay independent and enjoy life. To support those aims and achieve those objectives, the council provides integrated locality teams, which identify and support people in a more co-ordinated way, focusing on two specific areas. The first is: “Proactive identification via risk stratification of patients (18+, frail, multiple LTCs) at risk of a hospital admission and assessing the ‘whole person’ and their needs to keep them safe and well at home where it is appropriate to do so.”

I quote from this document—“whole person”—because a key thrust of health policy in the future should be holistic healthcare, which has become slightly muddled up and seen as definitely not mainstream. Actually, it should be at the core of the mainstream, treating the patient as a whole. I will come on to long-term care and conditions when I discuss the Health Committee’s report, “Managing the care of people with long-term conditions”, which I signed off as Chairman.

In Hinckley and Bosworth, we have a council that is proactively segmenting the population to treat people who are most in need as priorities, which I absolutely applaud. It also does that through the use of health ambassadors, who are “uniformed volunteers who support and encourage people to get more active more often. They undertake this by playing to their strengths. Some give presentations, some lead activities, some encourage and support new participants on current schemes. Some are happy to have a coffee after an activity and talk to new participants. The big thing is that they are positive role models who are empathetic with people and can support them to change and be more active in a way that is natural and comfortable to them.”

The programme is particularly effective when dealing with older people. In my beautiful constituency, Desford sports centre provides classes for elderly people, to keep them active. They have a chance to talk to experts—not doctors particularly, but sports therapists. They can play table tennis, sit down and do quizzes, play tennis—there is even tennis for people who are disabled. The whole idea is to get people who are a bit tired of life, or a bit sad by themselves, to meet other people and to engage in activities, thereby making them happier and healthier, and reducing the burden on the health service.

We are trying to divert away from A&E—the Leicester Royal Infirmary has one of the highest patient inputs in the country relative to its geographical footprint. I will not talk about the royal infirmary and the wonderful work of its health workers, but when the chair of the clinical commissioning group came to see what we were doing in Desford—on another visit, without the Secretary of State—we saw the Steady Steps programme. It is a 24-week free postural and stability exercise programme for older adults, aimed at those aged 65 and over who are at risk of falling, unsteady on their feet, lacking in confidence or likely to lose their balance.

One therapy that the sports centre is not employing, but to which I should like to draw the House’s attention, is the Alexander technique, which I have used in the past. Alexander was an opera singer, and he found that he could not sing. Part of the problem was that his chest was constricted all the time, so he could not project his voice—something that politicians are also quite keen to do at time when on the soapbox, if they can ever get there. Alexander discovered that breathing was connected to posture, and most people do not stand correctly with their hips as part of their back; they tend to have a break and swivel around the second and third lumbar vertebrae. He managed to get people to stand correctly to get their weight right. With their weight right, their lungs could perform properly. Those techniques, which have been
developed by experts over the years, should be looked at carefully by the Department of Health and Social Care, but I will come to ways that we can take pressure off the Department generally.

Through the Steady Steps programme, it is so exciting and empowering to see elderly people who have become immobile actually get back into the community. Some of them have mental health problems, and Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council has an active mental health support programme with five main objectives. They are to create networks to co-ordinate comprehensive and integrated mental health services in the community; to implement activities and events for promotion and early intervention and prevention in mental health; to improve awareness of mental health issues among children and young people, so that they do not think it strange that an older person is perhaps not as with it as they were in their 20s; to improve mental health and the impacts in the workplace; and to improve the quality of life of people living with dementia, and of their families and carers.

That is not rocket science; it explains to people simple facts of life about health. The programme brings the community together—it is a project that speaks to cohesion—makes it less likely that people will be upset by the behaviour of other people, and enables instructors to identify core problems. In the Hinckley and Bosworth area, we have over 6,500 dementia friends and 40 dementia champions. That is a lot of people in a constituency of 100,000 with 70,000 electors, and a very serious intervention.

Suicide is another issue that we as MPs deal with regularly. Most colleagues will have had cases in their surgeries about which they have had to approach care agencies. Leicestershire and Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council have taken very decisive steps, with the Start a Conversation suicide prevention campaign for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. The Start a Conversation website was launched on 10 September to coincide with World Suicide Prevention Day, and aims to provide information and signposting to people who are experiencing distress, to those worried about someone else, or those bereaved by suicide. The website is still in development, but will offer support and training to professionals.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Whether we are discussing healthcare in the east midlands or in Northern Ireland, the issue of suicide is prominent in my constituency. When I became its MP in 2010, the level of suicide among young people was at its highest. That was dealt with through the involvement of community groups and of people in the community who had lost loved ones. There was also interaction with church groups and those of faith. By coming together, we reduced the incidence of suicide, and by working alongside healthcare in Northern Ireland, which is a devolved matter, we found that together, we could address the issue. It took both the community and healthcare to make that happen.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before Mr Tredinnick responds, I remind the Chamber that there is half an hour of Back-Bench time left, with two other Members seeking to contribute.

David Tredinnick: I am sensitive enough to take the hint and will not delay the Chamber for much longer, Mr Hollobone. In response to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), we have a street pastor campaign in Barwell in my constituency, which really gets people in. The point about suicide that is often missed is the tragedy that it leaves behind and the damage to family and friends.

In my wind-up—I know hearing that will excite you, Mr Hollobone—I will focus on the Secretary of State’s announcement yesterday about putting cigarette-packaging style warnings on opioid painkillers, which I absolutely welcome. Of course it affects the east midlands. A report in the Evening Standard yesterday was entitled, “Experts hail our opioids investigation as addiction warnings are announced”. To give credit where it is due, the Evening Standard promoted that campaign, which I think is incredibly important.

The weakness in saying that we must stop all that is that no one has actually come up with any alternatives. People take those painkillers because they are in pain. Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council has produced a holistic therapists directory, which may be the first of its kind in the country. When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State visited, I took him to Burbage House Health Clinic, where he could see physiotherapists and chiropractors working together. He has declared his interest—I believe his wife is an osteopath—so I hope that under this Secretary of State, we will see some movement in this matter.

We cannot just stop people taking drugs without offering them an alternative. The three most effective ways to stop back pain are acupuncture, osteopathy and chiropractic. Acupuncturists, osteopaths and chiropractors are all properly regulated, so I implore the Minister of State to look carefully at using them. The other issue I wanted to mention is polypharmacy polymorbidity, which the Health Committee looked at. I gave the Minister as a Christmas present the report of the all-party group for integrated healthcare, which I chair. I do not know whether he put it in his stocking, but I look forward to hearing if he enjoyed it over Christmas. Perhaps he will look at the issue.

We are very myopic sometimes, thinking that our system is the only one around, but the best place to look at for solving some of the problems is India, which has a Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy. It is responsible for all the herbal medicine and the different services that are not mainstream or opiate drugs. We should look at what Prime Minister Modi has done there.

I have probably indulged myself a bit, Mr Hollobone, but it is so unusual to have any time in the House—thank you very much. I look forward to the Minister of State’s response, and again I congratulate the hon. Member for Lincoln.

10.10 am

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate about the issues that specifically affect the east midlands. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) for bringing the debate to Westminster Hall and the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) for expounding on some of the local and national issues in his area.

High Peak in Derbyshire is on the very north-west tip of the east midlands, which brings its own pressures to a very rural area on the edge of two other regions that provide most of our acute healthcare: Greater Manchester...
and Sheffield in the Yorkshire region. We are highly dependent on other regions for our acute healthcare. People can find it difficult to access our local healthcare services. It is important that they are able to access the best possible healthcare locally, to prevent their problems from becoming more serious and so that they do not have to travel much longer distances to access acute care.

When I was first elected, I had an indoctrination of fire on healthcare matters. A consultation by our North Derbyshire CCG had been ongoing for two years. It was called “Better Care Closer to Home”, so its aspirations sounded marvellous: people would receive the care they sought closer to home or in their own home, rather than having to travel anywhere. In practice, it meant an announcement in July 2017, just after I was elected, that our local gold-standard dementia ward, the Spencer ward at the historic Cavendish Hospital, was to close.

The ward had 10 beds and took the most seriously ill patients with dementia, whose families were no longer coping with them at home. Often, they had got to the stage of being violent and abusive, fighting against the illness and against the people trying to care for them. It is a Yorkshire house and I have seen members of my own family go down with it, and at that stage families need all the support they can get.

The Spencer ward would take those patients whom no one else could cope with and, within six weeks and with no drugs whatever, manage them and their families into getting them home again. The staff claimed it was the shepherd’s pie that did it, but it was down to years of skill, expertise and kindness. The patients could be cared for at home, which everyone had thought was impossible, instead of having to go into specialist dementia care housing with high-level nursing care, which often costs six-figure sums for each patient. The ward closed in February last year, and it was an absolute tragedy for the patients and their families—even more so for the patients now coming through with dementia.

We were told that the 25 skilled staff would be transferred to a dementia rapid response team, a group who would be able to visit patients in their own homes, giving support to the families and enabling continued care at home. In practice, however, I am afraid that has not happened. The response team is located 20 miles from some of the areas in my constituency that most need it, and only one of the 25 skilled Spencer ward staff members went to work in that team. Others were left with no jobs in the health service; they went into retail and their skills were lost. That was a tragedy not just for patients but for staff and our whole community, because once those skills are lost, once those jobs have gone and people have left the NHS, it is almost impossible—without years of training and dedication—to put that service back together again.

That is why I am so committed to fighting for services in High Peak that are being let go because of years of cuts to our CCGs, which have to make very short-term decisions based on balancing the books by the year end. NHS England does not let them look at any longer-term measures or decisions that could put the investment into the preventive health measures talked about by the hon. Member for Bosworth. That cannot be the case.

In 2016-17, the formula was changed for the CCGs. Our CCG went into deficit and then special measures under NHS England. The chief executive said that he and his board were prepared to make £12 million of cuts in north Derbyshire, but NHS England said that that was not good enough. It insisted on £16 million of cuts within six months, so the chief executive left. In the year just gone, 2018-19, the cuts have come on. With a deficit of £95 million for all the Derbyshire CCGs, which are looking to band together to achieve some efficiencies of scale, they had to make £51 million of cuts. We are constantly being told about the NHS 10-year plan and the £20 billion of funding coming into the NHS. I do not know where that is going, but our CCG will not see it. The Minister may smile, but I do not find it funny that over the next four years Derbyshire, the area I represent, will experience £270 million in cuts to health services, which are already stretched almost to breaking point.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln, I went out with the East Midlands ambulance service. I saw how stretched it was, having to travel vast distances and out of area, sometimes leaving little or even no cover, with patients perhaps having to wait five hours after a stroke, or being lost because of the cuts. The ambulance service has experienced five years of cuts, year on year.

Last year we had a Westminster Hall debate about the East Midlands ambulance service, which was attended by many of the Members present. I was delighted that another £20 million was invested in the service, but there is an issue with recruitment—once the skilled paramedics have left the service, recruiting them back again is very difficult. Meeting the targets for that extra £20 million will be extremely difficult for the service, through no fault of its own.

The issues in our local area put pressure on acute service providers as well. The hospitals in Macclesfield and Stepping Hill, which serve the north Derbyshire end of my constituency, have staffing problems and can shut their doors to High Peak patients because they are out of area—we are not in their region. The Macclesfield cardiology, gastroenterology and general surgery departments were shut to my local patients. Just before Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, Stepping Hill shut breast services to patients from north Derbyshire, who therefore faced having to travel 30 miles for the follow-up to a mammogram. That is a huge distance for people in rural areas to travel; often, there is no transport available for them, so they are reliant on lifts. Yes, there is community transport, but that has been cut, too.

Our voluntary services have been cut because the clinical commissioning groups have to make their cuts by the end of the year, and one area they can cut is grants to external organisations. The voluntary sector has had cuts to social care, befriending services and community transport. As the hon. Member for Bosworth has said, a sustainable health service needs such services in order to provide preventive care and to enable communities to come together and support each other, particularly the most vulnerable. That needs a framework, but voluntary sector services are being cut time and again, as I said in a debate in September. Some £300 million of cuts have been made to voluntary sector services in Derbyshire.

Health service cuts are being made alongside those to social care. Derbyshire County Council has made huge cuts to services, resulting in care workers’ shifts changing from a two-shift to a three-shift system. It wanted more efficiencies and was struggling to fill some shifts, but working early, late and night shifts is almost impossible for
anyone with caring responsibilities, which most social care workers have. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln, who worked in nursing, will sympathise with that and will know the destruction these cuts have on people’s lives. It is one thing to do that for a nurse’s salary, which is a professional salary, but it is very different to ask people to do that for the minimum wage—it was a living wage under the Labour-led Derbyshire County Council, but now it is less than the national living wage. Asking people to work a three-shift system for that sort of money is simply not worth it, so they have left in droves.

Our care home fees have been frozen while at the same time the minimum wage, pension costs and business rates are all increasing. The care homes are not prepared to take any elderly residents with any sort of additional needs. There are no nursing homes whatsoever in the High Peak area, so we have to go out of area. It is an increasingly difficult situation for families, who struggle to visit patients and keep family ties going. It is heartbreaking that, at the end of a long life, residents are taken out of their area, away from the people they know and love and their communities.

That is the impact on rural areas of years of cuts to health and social care and to the young people’s services provided by the county council. Both older and younger people are being squeezed. A couple of weeks ago I held a debate in the main Chamber on young people’s mental health, because of the low-level support being given. Derbyshire CCGs have cut the contract for community services with the third sector and there is no longer a service in place. The number of school nurses, who support young people through difficult times in their lives, when they have anxiety and are distressed, has been halved. There is an 18-month wait for access to child and adolescent mental health services. I hear from young people and their families who are desperate. Often, parents feel they have to stay with their child 24 hours a day, seven days a week, because they are so scared of the harm that the child may do themselves and the risk of suicide that the hon. Member for Bosworth mentioned.

Why are we letting it get to this stage? Why are we letting our young people suffer in silence? Why are we sending our older people away from their families? It comes down to the failure to look holistically at our health and care services in the long term. NHS England still has Derbyshire CCGs in special measures. They have been told to meet a target of between £50 million and £70 million of cuts over each of the next four years. They have to identify those cuts behind closed doors. There is a lack of scrutiny, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln has said.

Often, so much of the impact is on patients and GPs, who have to pick up the pieces. The strain on GPs is almost intolerable. Buxton has only about half the GPs we need. There are shortages in other areas, too. At my surgery, patients have to phone two weeks in advance to even try to get an appointment with a GP. If they do not phone early enough, they cannot get an appointment in those two weeks and they have to try the next day. That leads to an increase in people going to A&E and an increase in admissions to acute care and costs to the NHS as a whole. That is not a cost-saving process.

Budgets that do not look at the whole picture, to try to help primary care and to support people’s conditions, are leading to an increase in the need for acute care. Because of the lack of social care, once people are in a hospital bed it is hard for them to get out of it. The number of beds at Fenton ward in Cavendish Hospital—the one rehabilitation ward left in my constituency—has just been reduced from 18 to 10. That was going to happen in October but I managed to persuade the hospital that it might need some rehab beds over winter. It kept them open but it is now down to 10 beds. There is a waiting list of six or seven patients, who are stuck in hospital, taking up hospital beds because the rehab beds have been cut. That is a false economy.

I hope the Minister will look at how the system has an impact on the health professionals who are trying to deliver a service, and most of all on the patients who are suffering under it. Yes, there is price for rationalisation in any service, but we also have to look at the long term. As the laudable aims of the NHS 10-year plan set out, we need to work with our communities, support our professionals and help our patients to care for themselves. Unless this financial system changes, that NHS plan will be simply hot air.

10.27 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. In case hon. Members are not aware, I am a consultant paediatrician and work in the east midlands as a doctor during times that fit around my parliamentary commitments. I have worked in a number of hospitals around the east midlands: in Lincoln County Hospital, Mansfield Community Hospital, King’s Mill Hospital, and in both of the major Nottingham hospitals, Queen’s Medical Centre and Nottingham City Hospital. I have also worked at Doncaster hospital and I am now at Peterborough. I have a fairly wide experience of the different hospitals serving the east midlands population.

I was proud to hear last week that Peterborough has received a “good” rating from the Care Quality Commission. Not just that; the CQC will shortly return because the trust is not happy with “good”—it wants to receive an “outstanding”. It was somewhat displeased that the visitors focused on the areas they thought might be a problem, rather than on the areas we might have been able to showcase. The CQC will return to see the areas that it knew were very good already, to see whether we are entitled to see the “outstanding” mark. I hope that is achieved.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), my constituency neighbour, on achieving this hour-and-a-half debate. I was pleased to hear her welcome the extra money for the NHS, but disappointed to hear that she does not think it is enough, unlike the former Labour Health Secretary. We need to bear it in mind that a 3.4% average real-terms annual increase—£20 billion more—is a lot more money. I was also disappointed to hear about problems; it is easy to identify the problems and much more difficult to identify the solutions. Money is one of the solutions, but this is about much more than money.

I want to highlight some of the really good things going on in the east midlands. The hon. Lady correctly identified morale as one of the issues with the workforce. One of the things that affects workforce morale is people focusing on problems rather than on the areas in which excellent services are being delivered, which is the
focus of most of my constituents—me and my family included—who receive excellent service from the hospitals in our area. The problem with low morale in the workforce is that it causes people to leave. When people leave we have more locum staff, which increases costs. Since less money is available, there is less ability to trial new things, so staff leave—and so the cycle continues. We need to reverse that, so I welcome the new routes into nursing, such as nursing apprenticeships, and the hard work we have done to increase the number of nurses who can train.

As a doctor, I am aware of shortages in medical staff, particularly in paediatrics, which is the area I work in. The University of Lincoln is opening a medical school in the hon. Lady’s constituency. That is a really good intervention. Students commonly stay to work in the area in which they trained, and that medical school will enable that to happen. The Government also need to look at remuneration. The remuneration of my junior medical colleagues is significantly lower in real terms than the remuneration I received as a junior doctor at the same grade.

I would be grateful if the Minister looked at issues with retirement. In my constituency, some GPs and other doctors retire earlier than they might wish to, because if they continued to work they would accrue very high pension contributions that they would not benefit from. If they continued to work but withdrew from the pension scheme, they would lose other benefits, such as death in service benefits. The Government should look at that.

In my rural constituency, once I have visited the GP it takes me 15 minutes to drive to a pharmacy in the nearby towns of Grantham or Sleaford with the prescription I have been given. Some patients at my surgery, including me, are entitled to have their prescriptions dispensed to them on site. How frustrating it is, though, for constituents who do not have that entitlement but would if they moved one house further down the street, not because they live in the wrong area but because they moved practice after they moved house. A constituent recently wrote to tell me that if someone moves into the area and then changes their GP, they are not entitled to dispensing services, but if they move GP and then move home, they are entitled to those services. That seems incongruous. GPs at dispensing practices receive a revenue increase, so they have both an incentive to provide an excellent one-stop service to their patients and a financial incentive to work in a rural area that offers such a dispensing service. I should be grateful if the Minister would look at that.

When I was first elected, I was terribly worried about East Midlands ambulance service. In the preceding few months, I had attended a number of incidents—just as an individual member of the public who had been driving past—where patients waited an inordinate amount of time for an ambulance. That was completely unacceptable, and one of those patients died, although I suspect that was not related to the time the ambulance took to arrive. That is why my first Prime Minister’s question, my first meeting with the Prime Minister and my first meeting with the Health Secretary were all about East Midlands ambulance service.

I was therefore pleased to go back and visit the ambulance service recently and hear how much has been done. The extra money that has been put in has produced 67 new ambulances, of which 27 are brand-new and additional as opposed to new-for-old replacements. The service’s response time for patients in the most acute need—the most unwell patients—has fallen by more than two minutes, which is a good success; we have to bear in mind the rural geography. I was also interested to hear about the research that is going on. Not all improvements in healthcare are delivered by money; some are delivered by research and improvements in knowledge and treatment. The East Midlands ambulance service has a research and audit department, which is looking at ways that the service can deliver better care to its patients; that is excellent.

A number of hon. Members mentioned the challenges of delivering healthcare in rural areas. Hon. Members may know about the joint work between Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln, United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust, Public Health England, Health Education England and others on launching a national centre in Lincoln to look at how we deliver better care to people in rural areas—that is its main focus. That is another attraction for people to come and work in the beautiful county of Lincolnshire. The centre will look at data, research and technology. I would love to have time to go into all the different things it can do to improve healthcare for my constituents and others, but time is short, so I will move on.

Let me touch on orthopaedic services at Grantham. People rightly are terribly concerned about the number of people who prepare for an operation—they build themselves up, take time off work and put plans in place for the care of those who are dependent on them—that is cancelled. We understand the reasons why that might happen, but ULHT has worked really hard on delivering better care. The fantastic Grantham Hospital—it has saved my husband’s life on two occasions—has a designated ward for orthopaedic surgery, which is only for what it calls “cold” operations. That is part of the “Getting It Right First Time” approach, looking at how we ensure that we get the very best care in orthopaedic surgery.

Trauma services have been moved to Lincoln. People might say, “Oh, that’s a dreadful cut,” but it means there are more people on hand in Lincoln to deliver more operations more effectively and more efficiently; more people get their operations done—fewer are cancelled—and there is a dedicated team of people in Grantham who are knowledgeable in orthopaedics and focused on delivering joint replacements and other non-urgent care. Overall, the service has improved massively. I congratulate ULHT and Grantham Hospital on the improvements they have delivered, and I wish they were being shouted about more publicly.

I also want to mention the A&E at Grantham Hospital. My husband, whom I love very much, has had his life saved twice at Grantham Hospital, so maintaining A&E services there and ensuring that people can access them is extremely important to me and my family, not least because we live very close by. I welcome the fact that the A&E will be reopened on a 24-hour basis soon, but I want soon to be now.

I have run out of time, but I thank the hon. Member for Lincoln for securing the debate and I hope to hear some good answers from the Minister.
significantly below the national average. There is also expectation at birth across the east midlands was 79.3 years compared with 2.2%. In 2013-15, the average life episode than those in the rest of the country—66% of the population being overweight. People in the increased by 37%. Obesity is also a growing problem, the number of preventable deaths from liver disease has changing demographic? For example, in the east midlands, the funding to guarantee sustainable health services in helps trusts like that become more sustainable? Where is since December. How will the Government' s settlement of the financial year, and it has declared 15 black alerts predicted a deficit of more than £40 million by the end hospital deficits.

It is clear that the 'Tories' plans for NHS funding fall short of what is needed. The autumn Budget announcement of a cash injection for health services excluded public health budgets, training and capital, which means an increase of just 3% for health services when we have a childhood obesity crisis, cuts to sexual health and addiction services, workforce shortages and a backlog of nearly £6 billion in repairs. It is not even enough to wipe out hospital deficits.

Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust alone predicted a deficit of more than £40 million by the end of the financial year, and it has declared 15 black alerts since December. How will the Government’s settlement help trusts like that become more sustainable? Where is the funding to guarantee sustainable health services in the face of ever-increasing demand from a complex and changing demographic? For example, in the east midlands, the number of preventable deaths from liver disease has increased by 37%. Obesity is also a growing problem, 66% of the population being overweight. People in the east midlands are more likely to have had a depressive episode than those in the rest of the country—3.9% compared with 2.2%. In 2013-15, the average life expectancy at birth across the east midlands was 79.3 years for males and 82.9 years for females, both of which are significantly below the national average. There is also considerable variation in preventable mortality from the major causes of death across the east midlands local authorities, with an urban-rural divide. The urban areas of Nottingham, Leicester and Derby have significantly lower life expectancy than the average for England.

Money is, of course, only one of the issues surrounding the crisis in the NHS. There is a staff recruitment and retention issue, too. NHS figures show that there are 100,000 vacancies across the health service, including 31,000 across the midlands and the east of England. Therefore, 9.3% of posts in the midlands and the east—about one in 11—are unfilled. Constituents will also be worried about the integration of services in the east midlands. In recent years, councils have distanced themselves from sustainability and transformation plans and the integrated care systems in some areas, due to a lack of democratic accountability and scrutiny from stakeholders, including concerns over cuts and privatisation. Nottinghamshire’s ICS is an interesting case: the city council suspended its membership for six months last year for those very reasons, rejoining only in April 2019 after assurances were given to improve accountability and shared decision-making processes. I am sure that Members will be keen to hear from the Minister how democratic accountability and transparency is being improved in such cases.

Residents will also be concerned about the number of community hospitals that have closed or are under threat of closure. Residents of Bakewell and Bolsover have to travel to Chesterfield or Derby for their appointments, after their hospitals closed. The loss of those community hospitals impacts on rural areas of the east midlands, isolating people further because not only will they have to travel further to appointments, but so will any visitors, so patients are suffering. The Government have spent nine years running down the NHS, imposing the biggest funding squeeze in its history, with swinging cuts to public health services, and social care has been slashed by £7 billion since 2010. As we have heard, the NHS is clearly buckling under the pressure as a result, and standards of care continue to plummet. I would appreciate assurances from the Minister about how the Government will get a grip on the situation in the east midlands and across the country as a whole, to reverse the extremely worrying statistics and tackle the issues we have heard about.

Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust alone predicted a deficit of more than £40 million by the end of the financial year, and it has declared 15 black alerts since December. How will the Government’s settlement help trusts like that become more sustainable? Where is the funding to guarantee sustainable health services in the face of ever-increasing demand from a complex and changing demographic? For example, in the east midlands, the number of preventable deaths from liver disease has increased by 37%. Obesity is also a growing problem, 66% of the population being overweight. People in the east midlands are more likely to have had a depressive episode than those in the rest of the country—3.9% compared with 2.2%. In 2013-15, the average life expectancy at birth across the east midlands was 79.3 years for males and 82.9 years for females, both of which are significantly below the national average. There is also considerable variation in preventable mortality from the major causes of death across the east midlands local authorities, with an urban-rural divide. The urban areas of Nottingham, Leicester and Derby have significantly lower life expectancy than the average for England.

Money is, of course, only one of the issues surrounding the crisis in the NHS. There is a staff recruitment and retention issue, too. NHS figures show that there are 100,000 vacancies across the health service, including 31,000 across the midlands and the east of England. Therefore, 9.3% of posts in the midlands and the east—about one in 11—are unfilled. Constituents will also be worried about the integration of services in the east midlands. In recent years, councils have distanced themselves from sustainability and transformation plans and the integrated care systems in some areas, due to a lack of democratic accountability and scrutiny from stakeholders, including concerns over cuts and privatisation. Nottinghamshire’s ICS is an interesting case: the city council suspended its membership for six months last year for those very reasons, rejoining only in April 2019 after assurances were given to improve accountability and shared decision-making processes. I am sure that Members will be keen to hear from the Minister how democratic accountability and transparency is being improved in such cases.

Residents will also be concerned about the number of community hospitals that have closed or are under threat of closure. Residents of Bakewell and Bolsover have to travel to Chesterfield or Derby for their appointments, after their hospitals closed. The loss of those community hospitals impacts on rural areas of the east midlands, isolating people further because not only will they have to travel further to appointments, but so will any visitors, so patients are suffering. The Government have spent nine years running down the NHS, imposing the biggest funding squeeze in its history, with swinging cuts to public health services, and social care has been slashed by £7 billion since 2010. As we have heard, the NHS is clearly buckling under the pressure as a result, and standards of care continue to plummet. I would appreciate assurances from the Minister about how the Government will get a grip on the situation in the east midlands and across the country as a whole, to reverse the extremely worrying statistics and tackle the issues we have heard about.

It is clear that the 'Tories' plans for NHS funding fall short of what is needed. The autumn Budget announcement of a cash injection for health services excluded public health budgets, training and capital, which means an increase of just 3% for health services when we have a childhood obesity crisis, cuts to sexual health and addiction services, workforce shortages and a backlog of nearly £6 billion in repairs. It is not even enough to wipe out hospital deficits.

Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust alone predicted a deficit of more than £40 million by the end of the financial year, and it has declared 15 black alerts since December. How will the Government’s settlement help trusts like that become more sustainable? Where is the funding to guarantee sustainable health services in the face of ever-increasing demand from a complex and changing demographic? For example, in the east midlands, the number of preventable deaths from liver disease has increased by 37%. Obesity is also a growing problem, 66% of the population being overweight. People in the east midlands are more likely to have had a depressive episode than those in the rest of the country—3.9% compared with 2.2%. In 2013-15, the average life expectancy at birth across the east midlands was 79.3 years for males and 82.9 years for females, both of which are significantly below the national average. There is also considerable variation in preventable mortality from the major causes of death across the east midlands local authorities, with an urban-rural divide. The urban areas of Nottingham, Leicester and Derby have significantly lower life expectancy than the average for England.

Money is, of course, only one of the issues surrounding the crisis in the NHS. There is a staff recruitment and retention issue, too. NHS figures show that there are 100,000 vacancies across the health service, including 31,000 across the midlands and the east of England. Therefore, 9.3% of posts in the midlands and the east—about one in 11—are unfilled. Constituents will also be worried about the integration of services in the east midlands. In recent years, councils have distanced themselves from sustainability and transformation plans and the integrated care systems in some areas, due to a lack of democratic accountability and scrutiny from stakeholders, including concerns over cuts and privatisation. Nottinghamshire’s ICS is an interesting case: the city council suspended its membership for six months last year for those very reasons, rejoining only in April 2019 after assurances were given to improve accountability and shared decision-making processes. I am sure that Members will be keen to hear from the Minister how democratic accountability and transparency is being improved in such cases.

Residents will also be concerned about the number of community hospitals that have closed or are under threat of closure. Residents of Bakewell and Bolsover have to travel to Chesterfield or Derby for their appointments, after their hospitals closed. The loss of those community hospitals impacts on rural areas of the east midlands, isolating people further because not only will they have to travel further to appointments, but so will any visitors, so patients are suffering.

The Government have spent nine years running down the NHS, imposing the biggest funding squeeze in its history, with swinging cuts to public health services, and social care has been slashed by £7 billion since 2010. As we have heard, the NHS is clearly buckling under the pressure as a result, and standards of care continue to plummet. I would appreciate assurances from the Minister about how the Government will get a grip on the situation in the east midlands and across the country as a whole, to reverse the extremely worrying statistics and tackle the issues we have heard about.
15%—more doctors, 10,300 more nurses, midwives and health visitors and, in addition, over 15,900 more nurses on our wards.

I also point out that of those vacancies that several hon. Members mentioned, well over 80% are being filled by a combination of bank and agency nurses. Of course no one wants that situation to persist, but there has been a consistent decline in the number of agency staff, and since the transfer from the bursary to the loan system, much has been done working with nurses to ensure that courses are filled. We are seeing more applications than previously: this time around UCAS reported over 4,000 more applicants. Last year, my predecessor announced a fund to provide an increased package for postgraduate nursing students starting courses in 2018-19 in terms of employment in learning disability, mental health and district nursing roles, which are the key vacancies that need to be filled.

I will try to answer a couple of specific points raised by the hon. Member for Lincoln. She rightly voiced concerns about the closure of Skellingthorpe health centre in her constituency. As she pointed out, were there to be a closure, the CCG would be required to conduct a proper consultation. I spoke to the CCG yesterday and I understand that as yet—she may wish to correct me—there has been no formal request for closure. Equally, the CCG tells me—I hope this is right—that it will meet the hon. Lady later in May to discuss this matter, and that, were there to be a request, it would immediately inform her and offer her a meeting with it and the lead GP at Skellingthorpe to see what action could be undertaken. The CCG has also confirmed—she will understand this—that it appreciates that this is a rural community, and that there are additional challenges for local residents, so it is working not only with Skellingthorpe to understand the challenges and how they may be met, but to ensure that the rural network of GPs might work together.

The hon. Lady rightly expressed concern about CQC inspections, and I will go on to speak about those if I have time. She mentioned the recent inspection that took place on 25 February at Pilgrim Hospital, with a report published on 3 April. Although “requires improvement” remains the rating, there were marked improvements in certain areas, including in the standard of care, numbers of staff and nursing provision for children, and a real improvement in the triage time. She will appreciate that the trust is receiving substantial support from NHS England, including to help the hospital get out of special measures.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) gave us a valuable insight into mental health services, which are the responsibility of the hon. Member for Lincoln. She is right that the Department has been making the NHS the best employer. That work will be important in ensuring that the NHS can attract and retain staff, and the funding that backs it in the long-term plan, and the commitment to mental health diagnosis and treatment times is a significant change from the previous situation.

Ruth George: Mental health services were allocated £1.2 billion, but that money was not ring-fenced. That is the problem that CAMHS has had with the cuts. Will the Minister commit that any additional funding for mental health services will be ring-fenced, so that it goes where it is needed?

Stephen Hammond: There is a commitment to treatment and the funding that backs it in the long-term plan, and that money is dedicated to that commitment. That is pretty clear.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady is asking me to use the word “ring-fenced”, but if I say that the money is there and allocated for that matter, then it is specifically ring-fenced for it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) gave us a valuable insight into the NHS, given her experience as a consultant. She is right to say that we must tackle a number of workforce issues, and morale is undoubtedly key to that. I was pleased to see that set out in the initial workforce plan; and Baroness Harding, chair of NHS Improvement, has been asked to consider a stream of work about making the NHS the best employer. That work will consider a number of issues about retention and the culture and morale of staff. I look forward to the publication of that report, and I hope my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the new ideas it contains.

My hon. Friend was right to mention the pensions of a number of GPs and other NHS staff. She will not be surprised to hear that I am continuing to persuade Treasury colleagues to accept the Department’s proposed solution for that issue, and I hope we can make progress and make an announcement on that soon, which will be reassuring to many. I encourage my hon. Friend to write to me about the dispensing service she mentioned, and I will consider what issues we can take up. Finally, she was right to talk about the orthopaedic services at...
Grantham. “Getting It Right First Time”—GIRFT—is led nationally by Professor Tim Briggs, who was lead clinician at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital. That is making a huge difference, not only to the concentration, specialisation and number of operations being undertaken, but—equally importantly—the great improvement in safety and reduction in infections is leading to hugely better care for patients.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) mentioned A&E performance, and she is right to say that it fails to meet the target. However, she is wrong to say that this year has seen the worst performance ever, as there has been an improvement on last year. Over the past months, United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust has seen a huge increase in attendances compared with the previous year. That reflects the wider NHS, where demand is up by 6%, yet more than 4,700 patients per day are treated within the four-hour waiting limit. The hon. Lady mentioned Public Health England and Health Education England, but funding for those bodies was designed to be dealt with in the comprehensive spending review that will take place in the autumn. It was never intended to be tackled inside the long-term plan and spending commitment.

Briefly, let me mention another east midlands MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup). She was not able to speak today as she is my Parliamentary Private Secretary, but she has done great work in pointing out the benefits of Ilkestone Community Hospital, which I intend to visit in the near future. May I just say that—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I do not think the Minister can just say it. He must allow time for Karen Lee to sum up the debate, so perhaps he will bring his remarks to a close.

Stephen Hammond: Thank you Mr Hollobone. I will not just say anything other than that I wanted to address a number of issues about east midlands care, so I will put them in a letter and write to Members who have participated in this debate. It is important to address the huge number of issues raised by colleagues and ensure that the context is clearly understood. This Government wish to thank all hard-working professionals in the NHS for their work. We will do everything we can to continue that support, with a plan and the money to back it up, so that, both nationally and locally, the NHS can deliver for patients.

10.58 am

Karen Lee: I thank all those who have contributed to this excellent debate. Some comments have reflected the fact that healthcare remains something of a postcode lottery. In some areas we hear that everything is positive and good, but that is not always the case where I live. Travelling long distances to access a GP is not positive for someone who is ill, and that is not what my Skellingthorpe constituents want. That is not about an emotional attachment; it is a practical consideration.

The concern in Lincoln is that nothing is opening, it is all closing.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about suicide and mental health and I agree that we need ring-fenced funding for mental health care. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) spoke about problems delivering healthcare in rural settings, and people travelling long distances to access care. My Skellingthorpe constituents are not looking forward to that, should they lose their GP services.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Services: Redcar and Cleveland

11 am

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for rape and sexual abuse support services in Redcar and Cleveland.

As always, it is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I was pleased to secure this debate to once again bring to the Minister’s attention the crisis facing rape and sexual abuse victims in my constituency. I have raised this crucial issue in writing and on the Floor of the House, but the response from the Government has been disappointing. I have been given the same response about the money the Government are investing in domestic and sexual violence and abuse services, which is welcome, but it simply does not reflect the realities on the ground in my area.

In response to my question in the Chamber last week about the cuts to rape and sexual abuse funding, I was told about the Government’s work on domestic violence. While domestic violence is extremely important, and I wholeheartedly welcome the Government’s Domestic Abuse Bill, I was talking about rape and sexual assault services, not about domestic violence. So I am glad to have the debate today to specifically focus on EVA Women’s Aid, which is a fantastic charity in my constituency that does amazing work supporting vulnerable women and children who survive rape, sexual abuse and violence and childhood sexual abuse.

EVA provides services across a 94 square mile area, and last year it supported nearly 1,000 vulnerable women and many children. It goes without saying that the support provided is a lifeline to clients, with whom the charity has worked hard and carefully, often over a long period, to develop sensitive, caring and trusting relationships. That trust is vital to enable victims to get the support they need. Because of that record, EVA is a well-respected organisation in the local community, held in high esteem by local people and led brilliantly by Richinda and her fantastic team of staff. I pay tribute to them today.

Women feel comfortable approaching EVA because they know its reputation, how many women the charity has helped and the respect and esteem in which it is held in the local community. That is why the removal of EVAs grant from the Ministry of Justice’s rape and sexual abuse support fund is a devastating decision, which I urge the Minister to reconsider.

Since 2014, EVA has received funding from the rape and sexual abuse support fund to carry out its important work. The funding accounts for 15% of EVAs revenue and is a significant source of income for a small local charity. In March, EVA was informed, without any prior warning or expectation, that its bid to renew the funding for the 2019-2022 period had been unsuccessful. That decision means that from the end of June the funding for the 2019-2022 period had been unsuccessful. That decision means that from the end of June the funding for the 2019-2022 period had been unsuccessful. That decision means that from the end of June the funding for the 2019-2022 period had been unsuccessful.

The PCC and the NHS jointly fund independent sexual violence adviser services and a sexual assault referral centre, which are highly valued and important, but they are not responsible for funding longer-term therapeutic counselling of the type EVA provides, which is vital. We cannot continue just to respond to crisis after crisis; we have to support people in the long term, which is exactly what EVA does. That is why I am raising this issue with the Ministry of Justice once again.

Ministers simply cannot pass the issue down to police and crime commissioners. Until now, the funding has been directly provided to EVA from central Government and it is central Government who have taken the decision to withdraw it, with very little notice and with devastating consequences. The three-month extension to June to allow for “necessary adjustments”, as stated in the ministerial response I received, is welcome but inadequate. At this point in the funding cycle, when organisations already have commissioning arrangements in place, this is just a stay of execution on the closure of services. Five of EVA’s 23 staff could be affected by the decision. They are specially trained rape counsellors who provide specialist support, and they could now be lost, along with all their skills, experience and training, because of short-sighted funding decisions that have not taken into account the impact on many vulnerable women in my constituency.

EVA received notification of the cut on the same day that the Government announced a funding increase of £24 million over three years for victims of rape and sexual assault. The victims Minister celebrated, saying that the Government are “supporting more centres than ever”. That would be a welcome development, but it is not the truth in Redcar and Cleveland and it is not what we are seeing. In reality, we are seeing a cut to vital services.

While I appreciate that Arch North East is being funded to provide support for sexual abuse victims in the Cleveland police area, I understand it is receiving a similar amount to its previous funding allocation. It will have little extra capacity to support the residents of Redcar and Cleveland, who EVA currently caters for.

I do not know how familiar the Minister is with Cleveland; it is a huge geographic area, with a lot of rural, former mining villages and accessibility issues, as our buses are very expensive. Making one grant allocation for the whole area covered by the Cleveland police and crime commissioner fails to appreciate the different communities and demographics covered, as well as the fact that many women will only come forward to organisations and charities that they know, trust and feel secure with. Asking them to travel and to face a new and unknown organisation is going to put many women off accessing services.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and the powerful speech she is giving. It can be incredibly...
difficult for women to come forward. In south Yorkshire, where my constituency is, 3.5% of rapes result in a charge; nationally, it is only 4.1%. These figures are absolutely shocking and appallingly low. Does my hon. Friend agree that cuts to services, such as the one she is talking about and others across the country, will only make the situation worse and reduce the number of people, predominantly women, coming forward?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The levels of conviction for rape are a national scandal; more has to be done. The idea that we are seeing cuts to services and safe spaces for women coming forward is shocking. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend because not only is she here today defending her constituents and standing up for vulnerable women, but she ran the London marathon last weekend in support of a local domestic violence and rape charity. She’s talking the talk, as well as walking the walk or running the run; I congratulate her on that.

The geographic diversity of my area and the inaccessibility is a huge issue; it means many women will not access the services or be able to afford to access the services they need. The funding decision comes at a time when demand for independent specialist provision for people facing terrible situations, who would have nowhere to go if not for the services EVA provided. It is vital that we support them and enable them to get the support and provision they need. It is clear from those personal accounts how much EVA’s service users value the local, individually tailored support that they trust. As I am sure the Minister recognises, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said, it can take a huge amount of courage to come forward and seek help after the kinds of horrific ordeals these women have gone through. This funding decision risks closing the door on that option for many women and children in Redcar and Cleveland, so today I ask the Minister once again to please revisit this funding decision.

I would love to invite him to visit Redcar and see EVA’s fantastic services for himself. If the Government are truly committed to supporting more centres than ever and ensuring that every victim of sexual violence receives the full package of support they need, then I urge him to look at this one more time.

11.10 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I thank the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing this debate. We may not always agree on everything, but one thing we can agree on is that she is a doughty champion for her constituents and speaks up for them in this House at every opportunity. I know the subject we are discussing is, rightly, enormously important to many Members of the House more broadly. Sexual violence and abuse, as the hon. Lady has alluded to, are horrendous crimes that sadly affect too many in our society. As the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said, they continue to be a huge problem for our society and our country.

I will start by saying how important it is to me, as a Minister with responsibility for supporting victims of crime, to ensure that support is available to them when and where it is needed. The right support is essential to help victims to try to cope with what has happened to them and to try to start rebuilding their lives. Ensuring that more victims and survivors of sexual violence have access to high-quality services remains a key priority. As the hon. Member for Barnsley East will know, I have visited a number of services providing vital support to women facing abuse and violence around the country, including in Cheshire and Brighton, and heard of the struggle many of these services face to secure long-term funding.

 Those services tell me that there are three challenges: first, sustainability of funding; secondly, the need to move from a single-year, round-robin settlement to a multi-year settlement; and, thirdly, the need for the process to be made simple and clear. Often, particularly with the small local organisations mentioned by the hon. Lady, it is the same person who is the director running the organisation, delivering the service on the ground and sitting up until the early hours having to write multiple bids to try to build up the pot for a sustainable budget.
I have listened to those organisations, and in last year’s first ever cross-Government victims strategy we set out ways in which the Government planned to improve support to all victims of crime, particularly victims of sexual violence and abuse. My aims have been to ensure the provision of high-quality services, with sustainable funding and clear and simple processes that reduce the administrative burden while moving to a multi-year settlement, reflecting what those services say to me.

The national rape support fund, for which I am responsible, is one of a number of Government sources of funding for rape support services. A number of significant improvements have been made to that fund, the previous competition for which took place in 2014. The most recent competition commenced last November and, as the hon. Lady has said, the results were announced in March.

That funding will now be provided for three years, rather than annually. As the hon. Lady said, I also ensured a 10% funding boost overall for these essential services, with an extra uplift above that in London to recognise the differential demand levels there compared with other parts of the country. The rape and sexual abuse support fund now totals £24 million over three years. Far from cutting spending at the national level, we are increasing it, and I welcome the spirit in which she acknowledged that.

It is also important to note that this is not the only source of funding to which many of these organisations have access. As I mentioned, last November EVA and others were made aware that this would be a competition for the next three years. The hon. Lady would not expect me to do anything with public money other than to recompute it, at appropriate intervals and with appropriate criteria, to ensure that services continue to evolve and we continue to get the innovation and the highest quality of services that we would wish for.

I have always been clear that in the context of the support that victims receive, their needs must come first. In addition to trying to ensure geographical access for as many victims as possible, our competition ensured that stringent quality criteria were applied to all bids. As a result, 79 support centres have been awarded grants, including various small local providers, and the Ministry of Justice now funds more support centres than ever before and in all areas. For the first time, there are directly Government-funded services in all 42 of the country’s police and crime commissioner areas.

The number of PCC areas with Government-funded male support centres—we must recognise that men as well as women are victims of these horrendous crimes—has nearly quadrupled from 11 to 41 under this process. That is in addition to funding a national helpline and webchat service for male victims, following a significant rise in the number of men and boys coming forward to report crimes. Funding has also been extended to include those who suffered abuse while under the age of 13, recognising that many victims of child sexual abuse may struggle to access timely support.

We are also testing full local commissioning of sexual violence services with five PCC areas for three years, to explore the benefits for victims and service providers alike. Our aim is to better streamline services locally, including with the national health service, to reduce administrative burdens and challenges for centres so that more money be spent on frontline services.

Our final piece of the strategy was to increase spending from £31 million in 2018 to £39 million in 2020-21, to improve services for victims of sexual violence and abuse who seek support from sexual assault referral centres. We are working to ensure better service integration between statutory services such as the NHS and the third sector and charities, to provide joined-up and lifelong care and support for those who have suffered sexual assault and abuse and therefore need them. The NHS strategic direction for sexual assault and abuse services is an example of those commitments put into practice. It seeks to improve support for victims and survivors of sexual violence by joining up key agencies and ensuring we have a whole-system response to tackling sexual abuse.

That work is complemented by the investment the Government have made in supporting PCCs to commission support services locally, with £68 million of funding nationally going to PCCs. The Ministry of Justice is also funding much of the spending that PCCs do in this area. The PCC for Cleveland has been allocated more than £600,000 to provide support to victims, of which £45,000 is ring-fenced specifically to support victims of child sexual abuse. PCCs also, rightly, choose to invest some of their own funds additionally into these services.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, as a result of the recent competition in her Cleveland PCC area we will be funding Arch North East to provide support to men, women and children across the county. As with all centres receiving MOJ grant funding, the funding will be expected to support victims resident across that entire area, including her borough, irrespective of postcode. Her constituency will continue to be covered by the service.

Arch North East is approximately nine miles from Redcar town centre. This is where my geography may become a little hazy, but I think it is about a 30-minute journey by car or a journey of an hour or so on the 63 bus. I know the hon. Lady mentioned cost, and she is right to highlight the need to remove as many barriers as possible to accessing services.

In addition to usual support services, Arch North East provides independent sexual violence advisers for victims, and they make home visits across the area, including the entirety of the hon. Lady’s borough. Home visits are also offered for children. The service is primed and ready to take on any victims that require support in the area, and reassures us that it has one of the shortest waiting times for services in the country. Arch North East complements services provided by Helen Britton House, a sexual assault referral centre in North Ormesby. The SARC provides 24-hour crisis intervention and support 365 days a year with dedicated specialist staff.

Additionally, the Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Centre in Darlington is an hour away from Redcar on the train and is served by good local train connections with nearby towns in Durham and Cleveland. Residents in the north of the PCC area of Cleveland—for example, up towards Hartlepool—would also be able to access services in Northumbria such as SomeOne Cares, Grace Northumberland Rape Crisis and Tyneside Rape Crisis Centre. For residents in the south of the PCC area of Cleveland, Survive North Yorkshire can also be accessed.
I understand that the hon. Lady will be disappointed that one of the centres, which she has highlighted today, was not successful in its bid to secure national funding. I reiterate what I said earlier: she is nothing if not a doughty campaigner for and supporter of her constituents and constituency. However, it would be inappropriate for me to discuss in this Chamber the specific detail of our evaluation of that organisation’s bid, although I will re-emphasise that all bids were measured against clear quality criteria, as well as geographical criteria, with awards made accordingly. The decision not to fund EVA Women’s Aid was not taken lightly.

I recognise the value that providers bring to those whom they support and to the local community and the point that the hon. Lady rightly makes about the need, in this space, for familiarity and trust at the heart of conversations. However, my primary consideration must be to provide the best-quality support to victims, even if on occasion that means taking a difficult decision such as the one under discussion. I regret to say to the hon. Lady that we will not be revisiting the decision. I know that she will be disappointed by that, but I feel it is important that I am honest with her.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, EVA Women’s Aid will receive a three-month extension of its current MOJ grant, to help it to adjust during this transition period. I understand that EVA was also not successful in a recent competition for PCC funding. The hon. Lady may wish to discuss with Cleveland’s PCC his decision in that respect as well; I imagine she probably will do so.

The House should be in no doubt that the Government are determined that victims of rape and sexual violence will be supported by high-quality, accessible services throughout their journey to try to cope and recover from these hideous crimes. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues across Government, with the specialist support organisations that have helped to shape our victims strategy and with colleagues across the House on this agenda, to ensure that all victims of crime have access to the high-quality services that they need and deserve.

Victims of these most appalling crimes rely on all of us in the House, irrespective of whether we are in government or opposition and of whether we are a Front Bencher or Back Bencher, to represent their needs and to ensure that they receive the support to which they are entitled. It is a privilege to work with colleagues across Government and across the House. In this context, although she is not here given the nature of this debate, I also pay tribute to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), with whom I work closely on these issues. She, too, is a doughty champion of victims of crime. We will continue to work to ensure that victims in Cleveland and in all areas of England and Wales are heard and supported.

In conclusion, I appreciate that the hon. Member for Redcar will be disappointed by the outcome of the process, but I again reiterate my commitment to continue working with her to ensure that her constituents get the services that they need. I again pay tribute to her dedication to her constituents in bringing forward this debate and thank her for doing so.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.23 am

*Sitting suspended.*
Sikhs: Contribution to the UK

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the contribution of Sikhs to the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to open this debate, which comes at the end of the first UK National Sikh Awareness and History Month. I am sure this debate will cover history, community, faith, economy and culture.

The Sikh community is an established community in the UK, whose members first arrived in significant numbers in the 1950s. We know that Sikhs are now well established with a significant and leading presence in almost all professions. In Hounslow, almost 10% of the population identifies as Sikh. There are almost 500,000 Sikhs across the UK—approaching 1% of the total population.

The “British Sikh Report 2019”, launched in Parliament last week as part UK National Sikh Awareness and History Month, describes the contribution of Sikhs across our economy. Sikhs have an 84% employment rate, with top sectors of employment including public service, charity work, healthcare, teaching, accountancy and finance, and IT and technology. Many businesses are run by those in the Sikh community, including many in my constituency. Dr Rami Ranger, who is Sikh, is perhaps one of the best-known Asian businessmen in the UK, having founded a company which has won the Queen’s award for enterprise more than six times.

The contribution of the Sikh community to our armed forces continues to this day. Sir Frank Messervy, quoted in “The Sikh Regiment in the Second World War” by F. T. Birdwood, said:

“In the last two world wars 83,005 turban wearing Sikh soldiers were killed and 109,045 were wounded, fighting for the British Empire. During shell fire, they had no other head protection but the turban, the symbol of their faith.”

By the beginning of the first world war, there were more than 100,000 Sikhs in the British Indian Army, making up 20% of the force. Before 1945, 14 Victoria Crosses were awarded to Sikhs, which was a per capita regimental record. In 2002, the names of all Sikh Victoria Cross and George Cross recipients were inscribed on the monument of the memorial gates on Constitution Hill, next to Buckingham Palace.

Despite that background, this shared history is far less known or understood. Understanding different communities is vital for not just community cohesion, but getting policy right, including the rights of Sikhs to wear their articles of faith—an important right that led to exemptions for the kirpan in new knife crime legislation in the recent Offensive Weapons Bill debate.

Sikhs, like other communities, have faced an increase in hate crime attacks. Last year we saw an attack on a turban-wearing Sikh visitor outside the House of Commons. This appalling attack sent shockwaves across the whole community and the Houses of Parliament. That incident triggered our idea of a National Sikh Awareness and History Month, which is also referred to as Sikh Heritage Month and takes place this month, during April, the month of Vaisakhi.

Other right hon. and hon. Members will make speeches raising the issues that are important to them, so I want to focus on two main areas. First, I want to focus on the purpose and place in our national life of National Sikh Awareness and History Month, of which this debate forms the final parliamentary event. Secondly, I want to share a perspective on the Sikh community in my local area and the range of contributions made to the wider community.

Last April I tabled an early-day motion with cross-party support, calling for the UK to recognise April as National Sikh Awareness and History Month, noting that 14 April marks Vaisakhi and the founding of the Khalsa in 1699,
by the 10th Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. That early-day motion was supported by over 100 Members of Parliament from across the House, the all-party parliamentary group on UK Sikhs, and many other groups. It recognised that the national Sikh awareness months that have been established in other western countries have successfully raised awareness of Sikhs, broken down barriers, and improved cohesion and dialogue.

To take that forward, we formed a cross-party parliamentary steering committee, and I thank all its members for their support in recent months. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who is here today, and the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who is chair of the all-party parliamentary group on UK Sikhs and is also present.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough, who is leading the campaign for a permanent Sikh war memorial in London. Sikh war memorials have opened in Bristol and elsewhere, but it is absolutely time that we showed leadership and had a permanent war memorial in London. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend for working with me on the campaign for direct flights from London to Amritsar, which would serve communities in London and the surrounding areas. I also thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who is present, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

Many across the Sikh community were part of the early establishment of the idea last year with the Sikh Council UK. I thank Jagtar Singh Gill and Gurinder Singh Josan, along with Kirat Singh, for their support in the early days when the idea was growing, which led to the launch this month.

This month is just the start. With the foundations in place, we look forward to expanding the steering group and including community members and groups from across the country, so the project will be truly community led. The programme of events in Parliament in April has been supported by a range of Sikh community organisations and community channels, all of which I thank for making it happen. I also thank Satwinder Sehmi, an artist and calligrapher who contributed to the development of the logo for Sikh Heritage Month, which respectfully and symbolically brings together faith and heritage.

Our programme of events has been extremely well attended and hugely inspiring and engaging. The Vaisakhi event in Parliament, which is organised annually by the British Sikh Consultative Forum, brought together representatives from gurdwaras across the country for the launch of the project. There were also supportive messages from all parties, including from the Deputy Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. On the same night, a launch took place in the Scottish Parliament.

Last week, we had a packed event and discussion in Parliament for the launch of the “British Sikh Report 2019: The Sikh Channel, Everything’s 13 and the Basics of Sikh, which are also attending the debate, helped with the incredible Turban Awareness Day, which was educational in recognising and educating people about the significance and relevance of the turban. That event in Parliament was attended by almost 50 Members of Parliament from all parties.

Two lectures were given, one by Dr Opinderjit Takhar, the director of the Centre for Sikh and Punjabi Studies, on Guru Nanak and feminism, and one by Anita Anand on her new book, “The Patient Assassin”, which is about the principal actors, the story before and the story after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which many Sikhs and people of all faiths were brutally murdered by the British. For her, the story is personal, as her grandfather escaped death by minutes while his close friends and colleagues were brutally murdered. She also told the story of Udham Singh, who made it his life’s mission to assassinate the lieutenant governor of the Punjab at the time, to whom she also had a strong personal link through her husband’s family, who had had contact with him in the past.

The massacre 100 years ago is a stain on our nation’s history to this day. It is time for an official apology. I am extremely disappointed that that was not forthcoming in our previous debate and during April. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that again today. It is no surprise that the “British Sikh Report 2019”, published last week, found that 79% of British Sikhs believe that the British Government should apologise for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and that 85% believe that it should be taught and in school syllabuses. It is a huge disappointment that we continue that battle. The massacre was condemned by Winston Churchill, then Minister for War, as “an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation.”—[Official Report, 8 July 1920, Vol. 131, c. 1725.] I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East for his work and for the way he has brought together Members of Parliament from both sides of the House to call on the Government to make sure that the official apology happens.

Through April, a range of community-organised events have also taken place around the country, with MPs and councillors involved in Visit My Gurdwara and Langar with your MP events, which often coincided with important Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtans or community processions. This month takes on greater significance this year, as Sikhs around the world mark the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. I hope that National Sikh Awareness and History Month plays its part well in raising awareness and understanding of the Sikh faith, history and community, and continues to strengthen the bridges we build with Parliament and across nations with all our communities.

I will talk briefly about the gurdwaras in my constituency, Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha on Alice Way and my gurdwara on Martindale Road, which is run by the Nishkam trust, which play a huge role in many different ways, as I am sure gurdwaras across the country do. They extend charity and welcome and they support those in need. Every week, they welcome people who may be homeless or hungry. They welcome all, irrespective of background, through their doors. They run weekend classes and Punjabi classes, and host our surgeries as Members of Parliament so that we can reach all those in our communities. They have run immigration workshops—a huge issue in many ethnic minority communities—
where immigration advisers are supported in providing confidential support and advice to those who desperately need it.

The Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha on Alice Way hosts the Hounslow Disability Network, which again provides vital support to those who need it. There are wellbeing events with the NHS, the police and many others across our community that make a huge difference. They also support the arts, culture and education. My constituent, Hardyal Luther, the former vice-chairman of Guru Nanak Worldwide’s council of supporters, organises a Guru Nanak essay competition every year that brings together talent and encourages the younger generations to take part and explore their history, culture and faith.

We live in a peaceful and respectful society because we choose to make it so. The structures that we build between us as a society help to nurture those vital links that make us a safe place for all communities and a place in which we can be sure that future generations will also be safe and will understand and respect one another. The respect that we hold and the understanding that we nurture are part of a statement about how we as a nation recognise that we have more in common than that which divides us.

John Spellar: I realise that my hon. Friend is reaching the end of her excellent contribution, but she has come to a key point about the Sikh community in the United Kingdom. While enormously proud of its history, culture and tradition, it is also enormously proud to be British. Something like three quarters of the Sikh community in this country were born in the UK and are hugely proud of this country. Being proud to be Sikh and proud to be British identifies the Sikhs and is why the Sikh community makes such a great contribution to our country.

Seema Malhotra: My right hon. Friend makes an important point that goes to the heart of what this debate is about. Whatever our heritage, as we play our part in British public life, it is vital that we respect each other and show that, in a time of rising hate crime not just across our country but across the world, we take the time to value each other, respect each other, understand each other’s history, and understand our nation’s history through the context and lens of all those who make a vital contribution.

I will also make reference to our two Sikh Members of Parliament who are here today: our first turbaned Sikh Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough; and our first female Sikh Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston. They do us all proud and make a huge contribution, not only to debates in this House but to making sure that, as a minority community, we play our part and are seen to play our part in Britain’s mainstream public life.

With those words, I will end my speech. I thank you, Sir Edward, for chairing this debate, and the House for allowing me to call this debate and make my contribution to it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): As you can see, we have a large number of Members who wish to speak. We may need to set a time limit, because I want to try to get everybody in. In the meantime, perhaps we can have nice short speeches of no more than five minutes.

2.51 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to follow the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). I thank her and other colleagues for all they have done for the National Sikh Awareness and History Month.

I will mention three things that I have really appreciated about the Sikh community in my own constituency of Stafford, having visited the gurdwara on Tithe Barn Road more than once occasion. The first is the wonderful hospitality that visitors receive, which I have experienced during my time in Stafford and also at the Sikh temple in Moshi in Tanzania, where I lived for many years. The warm welcome I received was tremendous and a great credit to both those communities.

The second point, which has already been mentioned by the hon. Lady, is the contribution that Sikhs have made, are making and will continue to make to our country, whether that is in business, the professions, public life, which she rightly mentioned, including the very highest levels of public life, or the armed forces. She has rightly mentioned the huge contribution, and sacrifice, that Sikhs have made on behalf of the United Kingdom throughout both world wars, and indeed elsewhere.

It was my privilege on Sunday to attend the Anzac memorial service in Cannock Chase in my constituency, and to see the contribution that others from the Commonwealth have made, particularly those from New Zealand. However, it is equally right that we remember the huge contribution of Sikhs. Let us not forget that the number of people who served was absolutely tremendous, including 100,000 New Zealanders out of a population of 1 million. Well over 100,000 Sikhs served in the first world war alone. Those are tremendous figures, and those who served were all volunteers; they were not conscripts, as far as I am aware.

Thirdly, it is important to note the interest that our Sikh community in Stafford has shown in the community and public life. During elections they always invite the candidates to speak and answer questions, which I welcome because they extend the invitation not only from the Sikh community’s point of view but from that of the whole community of Stafford.
I will make two further points. First, I very much hope that there will be an official apology for the events of 100 years ago. We need to look more closely at events on both sides of the conflict, but particularly those relating to the United Kingdom. My Sikh constituents also have a real conviction—indeed, they make it really clear—about the importance of freedom of religion. The freedom to express one’s religion, and having the ability to do so across the world, matters hugely to me as a Christian. We in this place must uphold freedom of religion at a time when the situation in many countries around the world is becoming increasingly darker for those practising their faith.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. There is nothing more frustrating than not getting in, so I am afraid that I have to impose a time limit of four and a half minutes.

2.55 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Edward, for that ruling and for your chairmanship today.

I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing this debate. As she said, it comes at the end of our first ever National Sikh Awareness and History Month. There have been lots of events, including the Vaisakhi celebration, Turban Awareness Day, the lecture on Guru Nanak and feminism—which I am glad to say was given by Dr Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, the director of the Centre for Sikh and Punjabi Studies at the University of Wolverhampton—and many others dedicated both to acknowledging the Sikh contribution and to teaching more about Sikhism and what it stands for.

I will mention a few things relating to that contribution. The first is the military contribution of Sikhs—the sacrifice in blood and life, with lives being laid down in two world wars, by Sikhs fighting for this country. It is estimated that some 83,000 Sikh soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice. Memorials have been erected to acknowledge that sacrifice, including, as we have just heard, in Bristol. A memorial was unveiled at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire in 2015, and another was unveiled in Smethwick last year. We await, however, a national memorial in central London dedicated to their sacrifice. I acknowledge the leadership and hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). We want a memorial to be erected and for the bureaucracy to be cut through. The issue has cross-party support, so I hope the Minister will provide a positive response.

The second contribution by Sikhs is, of course, economic. Many Sikhs came to my constituency and others in the west midlands in the 1950s and 1960s, often to do hard, even back-breaking, work in steel mills and foundries. They often faced barriers of prejudice as they laid down the foundations for their new life. Although we quite rightly associate the Sikh community with social mobility, that mobility rests on the hard work of the first generation of Sikhs who came here. As is the case with so many immigrants, they worked hard to make sure that their children had better chances than them in life.

I also pay tribute to those who have worked to record the stories of those early Sikh migrants. For example, Anand Chhabra, founder of Black Country Visual Arts, has lovingly collated the Apna Heritage Archive’s photography collection, which records early Punjabi life in the west midlands in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and which was exhibited at Wolverhampton Art Gallery last year.

Alongside that hard work, there was great bravery. For example, there is the story of Tarsen Singh Sandhu, who led the fight in Wolverhampton for Sikhs to be able to wear a turban while driving a bus. Unbelievably, that was banned in the past, even when half the bus drivers in the city were of Sikh heritage. Tarsen Singh Sandhu was told that he would lose his job unless he was clean shaven and abandoned his turban, but he took a stand, rightly saying that he was doing nothing wrong. He had to face down great hostility to win his battle, and his bravery and that of those who campaigned alongside him paved the way for change that today we take for granted. Even after that great progress, however, there are still struggles. Legislation still has to be amended to ensure that the simple act of observing the five Ks and wearing a turban can be done freely.

What can we draw as a broader conclusion? I see a community whose story is overwhelmingly positive. Sikhs have achieved success in business, education, public life and, increasingly, politics, with the historic election of the first turban-wearing Sikh, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), and the first woman Sikh MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). This is a timely debate, and Sikhs should build on their success in the future.

2.59 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my good and hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for securing this important debate and for her excellent speech.

Despite being only about 1% of the UK population, British Sikhs have without doubt made an immense contribution to our nation. They have among the highest numbers of graduates of any community, and huge proportions of them are in employment and in the voluntary and charitable sector. According to official statistics, they also have the highest level of home ownership—the most likely of all the faith groups to own their own home. However, despite there being such incredible achievements, I want to concentrate my remarks, in the limited time I have, on some current and future initiatives.

In particular, there is the national Sikh war memorial. Due to the hard work of the trustees, of whom I am president, a central London site has been identified. I pay tribute to Members of both the Government and the Opposition who, on a cross-party basis, have helped, and also the Mayor of London’s office. I fully hope that the Minister will today endorse all that good work and support us in the future in every possible way, so that the dream will become a reality on that site.
I also want to touch upon direct flights to Amritsar, which is the global, spiritual and tourist hub for the Sikhs, and home to the most revered Sikh shrine, known sometimes as the Golden Temple. Since being elected, I have been pushing on this matter, and I am thankful to those hon. Members who, on a cross-party basis, attended the parliamentary event. Despite the anti-Sikh and anti-Punjab elements who successfully scuppered such efforts by the diaspora and the Punjab community over the previous decade, in 2018 we successfully reinitiated the Birmingham to Amritsar route with Air India, and this month, thanks to several meetings and sincere efforts, we were looking forward to the announcement of direct flights from London to Amritsar. However, the recent difficulties faced by Indian airlines, including the collapse of the major private operator, have unfortunately put paid to that. Furthermore, even the advances made with the Birmingham to Amritsar route have been cancelled, allegedly due to the escalating Indo-Pak tensions and the inability to use certain airspace, along with capacity issues.

Given the context, is the Minister willing to meet me, and perhaps team members from the Departments for Transport, for International Trade and for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, as well as the Foreign Office, to see how we could encourage some of our British airlines to take on what would no doubt be a lucrative route? Post-Brexit, our ability to increase such communities’ cultural, trade and tourism ties will no doubt determine our nation’s success and enhance our global links. I sincerely hope that the Government will fully support National Sikh Awareness and History Month every April, after its having been initiated this year under the leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston, with excellent events being organised by other Members and hard-working Sikh organisations.

I fully endorse the calls for a formal apology from the Government for the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, massacre, and the need to incorporate such historic colonial events into our national curriculum, so that future generations may learn from the blunders of the past. There has been an increase in hate crime, and after the horrific attack last year on one of my turbaned guests, who was queueing outside Parliament, by a guest, who was queueing outside Parliament, by a hate-filled individual who felt the need to try to remove his turban, we have turned a negative into a positive with a Turban Awareness Day for the second year in a row, attended by so many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). I am sure that with continued political support, the British Sikh community will go from strength to strength.

3.4 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

I congratulate my hon. Friend for calling the debate, and for organising the fantastic Turban Awareness Day last week. I know that many hon. Members present were there. It is certainly the first time I have worn a turban, and the process of having someone dress me in a turban was interesting and educational. I very much enjoyed it, and I thank everyone who was involved in organising the event.

I am proud that one of the first Sikh temples in the country outside London was the Guru Nanak Satsang gurdwara on the Cannock Road in my constituency. It is one of two Sikh gurdwaras in my constituency, the other being the Guru Nanak Sikh gurdwara on Well Lane in Wednesfield. I am always delighted to visit the gurdwaras. As the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said, people always get a very warm welcome reception, a delicious Indian tea, samosas and all sorts of other things, because of the Sikh tradition of offering food to anyone, regardless of their background. People are always well fed and warmly welcomed at gurdwaras, not only in Wolverhampton but elsewhere across the country and the world.

I am delighted to take part in the annual Vaisakhi procession in my constituency, which has taken place a couple of weeks ago between the Well Lane and Willenhall gurdwaras. There will be a very late Vaisakhi celebration in Wolverhampton—we always have the Vaisakhi Mela on the first Sunday of the month in West Park. Thousands of people flock there, obviously from the Sikh community but also from all different communities, and from all religions and none. It is a joyous affair, and I look forward to attending again this year.

I am proud that Wolverhampton has the second-highest percentage of Sikh residents in England, second only to Slough. Our Sikh community in Wolverhampton is vibrant and well integrated and makes a huge contribution to the local community and to society. It is fantastic and fitting that the University of Wolverhampton last year launched its Centre for Sikh and Panjabi Studies, which was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). The centre is the first of its kind in the United Kingdom, and I congratulate Dr Opinderjit Takhar not only on setting it up, but on giving the recent lecture in Speaker’s House on Guru Nanak and feminism.

I would like to reflect on what the hon. Member for Stafford said about the strong advocacy of the freedom of religion that the Sikh community brings to the UK. At election time, we always know what the Sikh priorities in my area are. We get invited to the local gurdwara; we get fed and watered, but demands are also put on us for the election. That is good and right, and I congratulate the various Sikh organisations that actually draft a manifesto for the election.

I echo those who have asked the Government for an apology for the massacre 100 years ago at Jallianwala Bagh. Although the Prime Minister has expressed deep regret, it is a shame that the Government have not gone further. On a more positive note, I would like to say how proud I am of the contribution of the Sikh community in Wolverhampton to business, education, public life and politics.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra)
for securing the debate, and I thank the Minister for being here today and for his clear commitment to his role. I look forward to hearing his remarks.

As we have heard, Sikhs have made an immense contribution to British society in a wide range of areas. Whether through business, charity work or the invaluable impact of the 83,000 Sikh soldiers who gave their lives in the service of the British Army, it is no exaggeration to say that Britain would simply not be Britain without the contribution of the Sikhs. Despite their magnificent contribution, Sikhs in Britain—and across the world—often face significant discrimination because of their beliefs.

Just before the Easter break, I, along with others, spoke in this very chamber about the many Sikhs who lost their lives during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, roughly 100 years ago. Thankfully, things have drastically improved since then, but Sikhs still face discrimination and even violence across the world. I declare an interest, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and I am here to speak out for the Sikhs as well. I am also pleased to have the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) as an office bearer in that APPG and I look forward to her contribution shortly.

According to UK Home Office data, 117 incidents of hate crimes against Sikhs were recorded in 2017-18. That figure is likely to be underestimated, as many victims of hate crime do not report them. Incidents of discrimination towards Sikhs have been recorded for years. For example, the “British Sikh Report 2013” estimated that three quarters of the UK’s Sikhs had experienced racism. According to the UK Sikh Survey 2016, almost one in five Sikhs had encountered discrimination in a public place over the past year, with one in seven having directly experienced workplace discrimination. The report found that Sikhs who wear religious iconography or clothing are the most likely to experience abuse. Since 9/11, both individual Sikhs and gurdwaras have regularly been on the receiving end of attacks by people who have mistreated them for Muslims and mosques respectively. There have been numerous high-profile incidents in the media, notably the attempted beheading of Sikh dentist Dr Sarandeep Bhambra in a Welsh supermarket in 2015.

It is simply unacceptable that anyone should be subject to discrimination, abuse or violence because of their religious beliefs, or lack thereof. We should do everything in our power to tackle discrimination against Sikhs in Britain. It is also right that we work with our international partners to tackle discrimination towards Sikhs because, unfortunately, the problem also afflicts many other nations, as has been mentioned. For example, in the US, the Sikh Coalition estimates that Sikhs in the US have experienced an average of one hate crime per week since the start of 2018, with a 17% spike in anti-Sikh violence since the 2016 presidential election. Those figures, too, are expected to be underestimated.

In India, where there is the greatest population of Sikhs in the world, conditions for Sikhs and other religious minorities have deteriorated over the past decade owing to the rise of Hindu nationalism, and attempts to alienate non-Hindus have emerged in conjunction with that ideology. The 2017 report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom notes:

*Hindu nationalists often harass Sikhs and pressure them to reject religious practices and beliefs that are distinct to Sikhism, such as wearing Sikh dress and unshorn hair and carrying mandatory religious items...Article 25 of the Indian constitution deems Sikhs to be Hindus. This creates an environment in which Hindu nationalists view Sikhs as having rejected Hinduism and as being enemies of India because some Sikhs support the Khalistan political movement, which seeks to create a new state in India for Sikhs".

The growth of such views serves only to make life harder for the Indian Sikh community.

Sikhs in Britain and around the world have contributed greatly to society. Despite that fact, their community continues to suffer significant discrimination. It is our responsibility in this House today to do what we can to tackle that discrimination at home in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and abroad, and to ensure that Sikhs and all other religious or belief communities are valued and allowed to live their lives in peace and to contribute yet more to society, having very clearly contributed much in the past.

3.13 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for succeeding in her application for this timely debate to mark the end of Sikh heritage, history and awareness month—a month she has worked incredibly hard to champion and organise. Like many Members across the House, I too have participated in the Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan in Birmingham over the weekend. The gathering is one of the largest in Europe, with more than 100,000 in attendance.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on UK Sikhs and the first female Sikh Member of Parliament, it has been a pleasure listening to Members from across the House rightly laud some of the contributions that individual Sikhs and the Sikh community as a whole have made to the UK.

When I was elected just under two years ago, I came to Parliament with a belief that it was here that we could make fundamental changes, and that we, as Members of Parliament, could lead on issues of importance for individual constituents, our community or the whole of the United Kingdom. I want us to do more than offer warm words about the contribution of Sikhs, or indeed any community, to the UK.

Despite making up 0.8% of the population, according to the 2011 census, Sikhs accounted for 2% of religious hate crimes recorded by the police in 2017-18. I want us to tackle hate crime and prejudice by taking today as a starting point for educating the whole population about the influence that Sikhs have had and how their impact has shaped the Britain of today, as well as many other parts of the world. It is in this place that we can choose to do more than discuss the contribution of diverse communities and speak solemnly about hate crimes. In this place we can put in place actions and policies to look at the link between the two.

The hate crime action plan refresh in 2018 was extremely disappointing, given the promises made to Sikh organisations that they would not be ignored or invisible to Government; but what matters now is how the Government address Sikh hate crime. I look forward to working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to address the under-reporting of Sikh hate. The new chair of the community safety group for the Sikh Council UK is Manchandan Kaur, and I hope the Government will reach out to her and the council to work with them.
Our children need to learn about the contribution of the Sikh community, and to do that, we must teach people about the honest history of Britain. We must learn about the positive and progressive parts as well as the repression and exploitation that has occurred in Britain's name. We need to learn that, during the second world war, British soldiers were paid differently depending on their race. In their thousands Sikhs, along with others, gave up their lives for our freedom. My grandfather also fought in the second world war.

Our children must learn about the Amritsar massacre, where British troops massacred unarmed demonstrators. They must learn about the life of Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, daughter of the last Maharaja of the Sikh empire and goddaughter of Queen Victoria, who pioneered the cause of women's rights in Britain and abroad. They must learn about the grassroots activism of many Sikhs in the 1960s to challenge unfair pay, working conditions and cultural oppression.

My father, the late Daljit Singh Shergill, was president of the Guru Nanak gurdwara Smethwick for 18 years, set up the first food bank during the 1980s recession in Smethwick. He worked with the miners during their strikes, raising funds to support them. He championed interfaith working and worked closely with the Harborne parish and the Bangladeshi and other minority groups. Gurdwara Smethwick has recently revealed the Lions of the Great War statue, commemorating the contribution of Sikhs to world wars one and two, led by the president, Jatinder Singh Bassi; the general secretary, Humraaj Singh Shergill; and leader of Sandwell Council, Steve Eling. And we must know the truth of the role of the then Government involvement in Operation Blue Star, otherwise known as the 1984 genocide of Sikhs.

If we genuinely want to recognise the contribution of Sikhs to the UK and the way it has shaped British society, the way it has moulded what it means to be British and the way it has shaped current and future generations, it is not enough simply to discuss it; we must end the discrimination that Sikhs face because of a lack of data. The race disparity audit used 100 datasets across Government to look at how people of all ethnic groups are treated across public services, but there was no data on Sikhs. As we celebrate their contributions, let us not ignore the fact that the Government’s aim to tackle burning injustices has been a concern when it comes to Sikhs. That is why Members across the House supporting the Sikh ethnic tick box in the census.

We in this place are here to make fundamental change and lead on what is important. I hope that today the Minister, as a Member of the Government, will commit to genuinely following through on the issues raised. In doing so the Minister will have my full support, and the APPG will be happy to work with officials to develop a programme of work.

3.17 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for securing this extremely important debate today. I want to start by putting on the record my sincere gratitude for all the support and good will that I have received from the Sikh community in Coventry. Their help and encouragement has been and will always be very much appreciated.

There are many gurdwaras in my constituency and across Coventry. They are not only places of worship, but important community hubs that bring people together and, as anyone who has visited a temple will know, are places of great benevolence, where everyone is welcome and food is shared with the rest of the community. The annual Vaisakhi celebration is firmly woven into our city’s cultural calendar. Thousands of people take part in the Nagar Kirtan—the parade—which starts at the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Parkash in my constituency, and is a joyous and inclusive celebration that is attended and enjoyed by Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike. The event contributes successfully to broadening our city’s cultural life.

Similarly, the Sikh community contributes tremendously to the success of the economy of both Coventry and this country. The Sikh community certainly punches above its weight in this area, with a deserved reputation for having a strong work ethic and being disproportionately successful in business. It is a similar story in our vital public services, where Sikhs make such an invaluable contribution to our armed forces, our NHS and our education sector.

As well as the cultural and economic contribution that the Sikh community makes to our city, there is a significant social contribution, not least to the health and wellbeing of our environment. Sikhs have a strong relationship with the environment, which is an integral part of their faith and identity. That connection with the natural world prompted Coventry’s Sikhs to commit to planting more than 550 trees across the city to mark the 550th anniversary of the birth of Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. That fantastic initiative will help to restore nature to our cities, parks and green spaces, and secure a healthy, resilient and sustainable environment that will benefit people and wildlife for generations to come.

That sense of social responsibility does not end with the natural environment. Public service is hugely important to Sikh identity, and helping others is part of their way of life. Sikhs constantly strive to do more and find new ways of contributing to their local community, whether that is through the time they give up or the money they donate to important local charities and projects. I admire and am grateful for their work throughout my city, and I thank the 16,000 Sikhs in Coventry for their social, cultural and economic contributions.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I echo the points that my hon. Friend is making so well. In my constituency, the Sikh community has done a huge job and been at the heart of our community, both commercially and through its public leadership. I place on the record my thanks to Mota Singh, who is standing down as a councillor after 40 years of public service. What a terrific record that has been.

Colleen Fletcher: I agree with my hon. Friend. Sikhs contribute so much each and every day across all walks of life, and their culture, diversity, enterprise and values of faith, family, and community help to make our city a more unique, integrated, tolerant and vibrant place to live in, work and visit.
3.22 pm  
**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing the debate and on her powerful speech. I am delighted to speak in this debate, and I welcome the launch of National Sikh Awareness and History Month. I pay tribute to the work of my colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for Feltham and Heston, and for Slough (Mr Dhesi) in pursuing that important initiative. It has also been wonderful to see recent events in Parliament—my personal favourite was definitely Turban Awareness Day.

My city of Manchester contains a significant Sikh population and provides a prime example of the beauty of our diverse society. It is particularly noticeable how well the Sikh community has integrated itself into the local community, not just through business, but through charity work and the hospitable nature of the local gurdwaras. My local gurdwara is a lively, colourful and welcoming place. I recently visited it for the Vaisakhi celebrations, and was touched by the warm and very Punjabi welcome.

I have seen over the years the positive impact that Sikhs have had not just in my constituency, but across Britain and in all walks of life. Minorities such as British Sikhs exemplify all that is great about Great Britain, which is home to many of the world’s religious and ethnic minorities. It is a place where we strive to create the conditions for minorities to thrive, safe in the knowledge that there exists a robust framework of equality and non-discrimination legislation, and professional practice. Other examples of the contribution that Sikhs make to the UK are witnessed in the British Army where, as Members have said, many Sikhs have served with distinction. We still have some way to go before we fully realise our equality aspirations, but the Equality Act 2010, passed by a Labour Government, remains a significant landmark on our journey to a more equal society for all.

As for other minority communities, however, challenges remain for British Sikhs, and ignorance of the Sikh religion often lies behind prejudices. Sadly, the Sikh community continues to face discrimination. For example, a report by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims described the very direct and tangible impact that Islamophobia has on our Sikh communities. Whether that is gurdwaras being defaced, or Sikh men such as Dr Sarandeep Bhambra being targeted by Islamophobes because of the mistaken perception that they are Muslims, we are acutely aware that more must be done by all in society to tackle the impact of rising Islamophobia that affects all our communities.

Given the escalation in bigotry after the Brexit vote and the rise in racial discrimination and hate crimes on grounds of race and religion, it is important that we reassert the Britishness of our minority groups, and integrate their history and stories in our national imagination. To challenge the racism of far right groups, we must repel the myths that are peddled about our communities, and we must celebrate the tremendous contributions made by those communities to the UK. I believe that the positive contributions made by Sikhs and other Commonwealth citizens to our British history should be included and widely taught in national school curricula. The time is right to pay tribute to British Sikhs and all they have achieved, because their contribution amounts to so much more than their numbers. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to participate in this much-needed debate, which recognises and celebrates the wonderful contributions made by the Sikh community. Finally, let me conclude with the wise words of Guru Nanak, who said:

“He who regards all men as equals is religious”.

3.26 pm  
**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for her work in establishing National Sikh Awareness and History Month. It has been a wonderful month of celebration, education, learning, and sharing food, which is a great thing and definitely to be encouraged. This month the Scottish Parliament held its first Vaisakhi reception, which was so well attended that extra people had to be squeezed into the garden lobby. More and more people kept coming, which was great to see.

I thank Charandeep Singh and Ravinder Kaur Nijjar from Glasgow for their help in gathering information on the Sikh community in Scotland for my contribution to this debate, and for their tireless community work. In her interfaith role, and through the network of Scottish gurdwaras, Ravinder has been incredibly active over nearly 30 years in promoting dialogue and understanding between faiths, as well as promoting the Sikh community. After our debate on Jallianwala Bagh, she told me that her grandfather had survived that massacre because, as a young man, he lay underneath the bodies. That brings home to us all how that link is still there within human memory, including here in the UK, and it is because that link is so real for so many that the lack of an apology from the Prime Minister was so disappointing. Ravinder also told me that in 1920, Sikhs based at Glasgow University wrote to the then Glasgow Herald to voice their outrage at those events. This is not something that happened in another country far away and a long time ago; this is very real to communities today, and I urge the Minister to do all he can to secure that apology.

The established Sikh community settled in Glasgow in the early 1920s, and the first gurdwara was established in South Portland Street in the Gorbals in the 1940s. The community has grown in both numbers and institutions. Scotland’s eight gurdwaras, based in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee and Irvine, serve communities across the nation and are used by 4,000 individuals each week, including Sikhs and those from other backgrounds. During the Vaisakhi celebrations we saw the Nagar Kirtan procession through the streets of Glasgow, and it was an absolute joy to behold and be part of. The tradition of langar—providing a free meal—was begun by the first guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, expanded by Guru Angad and Guru Amar Das, and it remains strong to this day. I very much enjoyed sharing a meal with my colleague Sandra White MSP and the congregation at the Glasgow Central Gurdwara Singh Sabha a fortnight ago. The food was delicious, and I encourage anyone who can to go there. As other Members have reflected, visitors are very much welcomed when they go through the doors.

**Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on her role in securing this important debate. Everybody recognises the contributions of the Sikh community in the social and semi-political
fields, but I am glad to say that in my constituency and my area, the Sikh community has played a major part in the mainstream politics of Britain. It was where the first Sikh—Indian-born—was elected as a local councillor, and where Piara Singh Khabra was elected as Member of Parliament. Parmjit Dhanda was elected as a Member of Parliament, as was Marsha Singh, who was the Member for Bradford West. The Sikh community is not only playing a part in social life, but playing a positive role in bringing communities together in the mainstream politics of Britain.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent point. Sikhs have played a role in many different fields, as they should. Two Members who have spoken this afternoon, the hon. Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and for Slough (Mr Dhesi), are Sikhs who have made their contributions to politics. There is a great contribution going on across the UK, and we need to see many more Sikhs taking up the role of elected Member.

Each week, the gurdwaras in Scotland serve over 3,000 meals, all prepared and distributed by volunteers. In addition, Seva Scotland prepares meals in the gurdwara and distributes them to the vulnerable in society through mobile food banks, which provide over 100 hot, fresh meals a week in Glasgow and Edinburgh to the most vulnerable, many of whom are homeless. In addition, the Sikh community regularly raises funds for Scottish charities, including the Glasgow Children’s Hospital Charity, for which it recently raised over £8,000.

The Sikh community works hard to create stronger, integrated communities. As the hon. Member for Slough and others have mentioned, there has been anti-minority hostility and hate crime about, which the Scottish Sikh community has taken on through a vibrant proactive approach to promoting diversity in Scotland. Each year, the Network of Sikh Organisations educates over 4,000 Scottish school pupils, and interacts and engages with over 40,000 non-Sikh visitors to gurdwaras. The Gurdwara Guru Granth Sahib Sikh Sabha on Albert Road is particularly noted as being so welcoming that it has a four-star rating from the tourist agency VisitScotland. It also does outreach; it recently did a turban-tying event in Queen’s Park, with members of the community turning up on a beautiful sunny day to show how turbans are put together. As other elected Members have mentioned, learning how that feels was an experience, and it was good to get the opportunity to do that outside in the sunshine.

As the local elected Member for three of Glasgow’s four gurdwaras, I know that the Sikh community regularly engages with local and national Governments on issues of importance to the Sikh community, most recently the Sikh census question, but also on security issues after the scandalous attack on the Guru Nanak gurdwara in Edinburgh last year. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) asked me to pass on how strongly the community in Edinburgh felt about that. There was great solidarity, with the community coming out in support of those from the gurdwaras. The Scottish Government’s Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development, Ben Macpherson, who is also the local MSP, was out there giving his support to the community as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) has been active in campaigning on the Jagtar Singh Johal case. I know that there was a meeting with the Foreign Secretary last week, and that the all-party parliamentary group led by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston has also been campaigning on that issue, backed by the solidarity of the gurdwaras.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I endorse those comments. I myself met Jagtar’s wife and brother last week after they had met the Foreign Secretary, so there is cross-party, consensual agreement that we support the “Free Jaggi Now” campaign.

Alison Thewliss: I am glad to have the hon. Gentleman’s support; it is important that we stand together on these issues as much as we can.

I have received representations from the gurdwaras in my constituency about the difficulties caused by the UK Home Office in the recruitment of Sikh celebrants. When I visited the Vaisakhi celebrations, I was pleased to see that the Sikh celebrants had been able to get into Glasgow and participate in those celebrations, which I believe involved a 48-hour reading of the Sikh holy scriptures. If that is going to be done in a shift over 48 hours, there need to be plenty of celebrants to make it possible.

The Scottish Sikh community is engaged in international activity. The Sikh Council of Scotland was founded in 2002 by Gurdeep Samra, and under President Sulakhan Singh is providing scholarships worth £700,000 to 290 young children in the poorest parts of India, covering their tuition fees, transport, food and schooling costs and removing that burden from their parents. The community also supports work to empower young women by providing training in high-skilled tailoring centres, where those women are trained in the art of tailoring, sewing and design. Hundreds of young women have enrolled, and after their training, each qualified young woman is provided with a sewing machine free of charge to open their own tailoring shop locally, to act as a source of income for those women and their families. Some 90% of young women enrolled in that scheme reach the stage of opening their own local centre, which is quite incredible. The Sikh community also funds six eye camps in India and provides six eye camps in that country, which have provided eye care and operations such as cataract surgery to over 6,000 individuals, completely free of charge.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the importance of education. All the Sikh gurdwaras in Scotland provide a range of educational facilities, including Punjabi heritage classes, tuition classes, computing classes and health and wellbeing classes. Those are all free, and seek to increase and improve the life chances of people from minority ethnic communities. Combined, the gurdwaras educate over 4,000 young Scottish Sikhs through their educational services. That is a great thing for the community, particularly as it links together the older and younger generations through language.

Leith-based Sikh Sanjog, founded by Trishna Singh OBE in 1989, is particularly notable as an organisation run by women, and I wish it all the best on its 30th birthday this year. Sikh Sanjog has run the Punjabi Junction cafe for the community, and offers a range of services to inspire and empower Sikh women and young people to advance their life opportunities through the building of skills, confidence and social inclusion. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh
North and Leith has told me how much that means to the local community. The Sikh community is also expanding its footprint on the national stage through the advocacy charity Sikhs in Scotland, under the leadership of Charandeep Singh, which will represent the needs of that community across civic Scotland. As other hon. Members have mentioned, Sikhs have made an economic contribution. The two stunning gurdwaras in Glasgow, which I invite everybody to visit, invested £15 million in Scottish communities, which is significant in fundraising terms.

I will finish with a wee story about how the Sikh community is regarded in Glasgow. The painting club at Toryglen community hall has produced for me the best when Members can debate and talk about the beauty and diversity of their constituents and how much they add and contribute. It makes this a very special place.

We have heard a lot about the contribution of Sikhs in both world wars, and a recognition of the role that Sikhs played in our history. Sikh British Indian soldiers were just 2% of the population, but 20% of the British Indian Army, and I join other Members in calling for a war memorial in central London to recognise and celebrate that fact. I hope that when the Minister rises to his feet, he will agree and say that that will happen. As we have already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), a place for that memorial has already been identified.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston said, it is sad that this history month was born out of an attack on a turban-wearing Sikh outside Parliament, a place where we hope we break down barriers. However, as we have heard, something positive has come out of that negative. It was a pleasure to be part of today’s debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on having secured it. I also congratulate all the members of the all-party parliamentary group on UK Sikhs who have contributed to this very special month. It is lovely to see Parliament as diverse as it has been this month; sometimes, I think this place is at its best when Members can debate and talk about the dignified with which they responded. That is testament to how we all need to embrace, understand and appreciate each other’s cultures.

A hundred years later seems like the right time for an apology for the Jallianwala Bagh murders. That incident should be taught in schools; it is time and it feels right. We have been talking about suffrage and the contributions that Sikh women made to suffrage movements, and we have talked about those centenary celebrations, but it is time to acknowledge the good and the bad and ensure that that incident is taught in schools.

We have heard a lot today about the “British Sikh Report 2019”. It refers not only to the many Sikhs who work in the public sector, but to those in the care sector. I found that a fascinating piece of research, and we should all reflect on the positive role that Sikhs play in public life.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) spoke with pride about his Sikh community and about events in the British empire that need to be investigated. What he said is true. Often history likes to talk about what are considered to be the good bits, but for us to understand and mature as a society, we need to talk about the bad bits too, so that history does not repeat itself, as we have seen in the recent increase in hate crime.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) spoke about Sikh soldiers and the ultimate sacrifice. He talked about the cross-party support and all the firsts we have here in Parliament and, beyond that, in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) talked about his constituency. He has hit the ground running, to say the least, and has always been so calm in doing so. He often talks about turning a negative into a positive, but I congratulate him on being elected as the first ever black, Asian and minority ethnic representative in the UK delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I am sure he will take that delegation by force and ensure that everything is considered in the right way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) talked about education about the turban and the gurdwaras in her constituency. She is no longer in her place, but she talked about West Park, and it sounded like the place to be. I might just have to pay a visit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) talked about her constituency with such joy and grace, but I must congratulate her on being the first female Sikh Member of Parliament. I remember when she was elected, everyone was saying, “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe that you are the first and there wasn’t one before.” There was almost a sense of it being a shame on the House. I congratulate her on being the first female Sikh Member and her words about being an advocate for action, not warm words. We must never forget how we can use this place to ensure that the Government make the changes they need to make. We need fewer warm words and more action.

My hon. Friend mentioned Princess Duleep Singh and the role she played in the suffrage movement. Often, women of colour are excluded from the history books and we have to dig deep to find the role they played, even when we know they played a full role and often made a bigger sacrifice to do so. She also mentioned the race disparity audit having no data on Sikhs. If the Government are going to do something, it is important that is done in its entirety, so that it is meaningful. If we are going to go through a process of auditing, it is important that we make it as meaningful as possible. The debate about having Sikh as a recognised box is not
[Dawn Butler]
a new debate, and it could easily have been included in the Government’s race disparity audit. Will the Minister explain why that was not the case?

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) talked about how Sikhs punch above their weight and the planting of trees around Coventry. I should not forget to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). He talked about the warm Punjabi welcome and everything that is great about Great Britain, and that is the thing: Great Britain is known for its diversity. People coming from other countries often say, “I love the diversity, the unity and the acceptance.” It is not about tolerance. I do not want to be tolerated; I want to be accepted and appreciated for the contributions to society that my family and I make. My hon. Friend talked about the role we can all play in rooting out racial discrimination. Debates such as this highlight how we all have a significant role to play in ensuring that there is less hate in society, and more acceptance.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Edward. Being in the House of Commons, more often than not I am really proud of our role as advocates for our communities. It is brilliant that more than 20 Members of Parliament have come to this debate to make a contribution to celebrate Sikhs and Sikhs in British society. That is extraordinarily uplifting and a brilliant way of marking the almost conclusion of UK National Sikh Awareness and History Month. That event came out of a negative attack outside Parliament, and what a fantastic way it is of turning that negative, terrible thing that we all condemn into something positive.

In this debate, we have all come together to make a positive contribution about Sikhs in our society. I love the idea of having a month that is not only about history and what happened in the past, but about today and celebrating the hugely positive contribution that Sikhs make in Great Britain and around the world, as we have heard. We have had more than 20 contributions. I will do my best to respond to as many as possible of the points raised, while leaving the customary two minutes for the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). I congratulate her on securing this debate and pay tribute to her for the campaign she has run and all the work she has done.

My Department is in charge of communities in this country, and we work closely with communities across Great Britain to try to find ways to create that cohesion that the Opposition spokesperson just spoke about. I reiterate what has been said about the positive contribution that Sikhs have made to British society. Their vibrancy and selfless service are renowned. I have never visited a gurdwara, so I will have to do that. I do not have one in my constituency, but the huge contribution that gurdwaras are making to communities across Great Britain is absolutely fantastic.

Eddie Hughes: I have an excellent gurdwara in Willenhall in my constituency. The Minister would be welcome to come and visit it with me at any time.

Jake Berry: Fantastic—I accept that invitation. I am sure my hon. Friend will also take that opportunity to lobby me on his high street competition bid, but I happily accept his invitation.

I am delighted that our Parliament has been made richer and more diverse. Having the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) speak today was one of the highlights, as he is the first turban-wearing Sikh in Parliament. We should celebrate his historic role in the story of our Parliament and our nation.

In addition, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) is the first female Sikh, which we should also celebrate. I was surprised when the election results came in and that news came over the wires. It says something about this place that we had not until that point had a female Sikh representative. The hon. Lady is doing a fantastic job representing not just her constituents but the Sikh community more widely.

I appreciate that it is a couple of weeks late, but I place on record my good wishes to all Sikhs who celebrated Vaisakhi recently with their family and friends. I think it is fantastic. The Prime Minister will host an event in Downing Street early next month to celebrate Vaisakhi with members of the Sikh community from across the UK.

Mr McFadden: I thank the Minister for his opening remarks, and I am sure that the Sikh community will be very grateful for his Vaisakhi greetings, but the Government missed an opportunity a couple of weeks ago, on the 100th Vaisakhi since the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, to respond to cross-party calls for an official Government apology. Was that the last word on the subject, or can we expect to hear more from the Government, perhaps at the Vaisakhi celebration that he mentioned?

Jake Berry: The right hon. Gentleman would not expect me to prejudge what the Prime Minister may or may not say at that Vaisakhi celebration; I do not have any information about what is planned. All I would say is that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 13 April 1919 is, as Members have described it repeatedly in this debate, a stain on the history of this country. It seems to me quite right that, 100 years on, people are calling on the Government to mark it, and to change what the Government have done. The Prime Minister recently made it clear that she deeply regrets what happened and the suffering caused, saying: “The tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 is a shameful scar on British Indian history.”—[Official Report, 10 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 308.] That is a direct quote from the Prime Minister, and of course the British high commissioner to India, Sir Dominic Asquith, laid a wreath on the Jallianwala Bagh centenary, expressing regret for what happened.

It is important to reflect on the past, and I do not know what will happen at the Vaisakhi celebration in Downing Street. I will pass on the comments from this debate to the Prime Minister, and more widely to those across Government. There may be an opportunity for others to raise the matter with the Prime Minister if they have the opportunity to do so in Parliament, at Prime Minister’s Question Time, on or around the time of that celebration in Downing Street.
I will move on to talk about how the Government engage with the Sikh community. We have heard about the hugely important contribution that the Sikh community makes to Britain. It is important that I put on record how the Government, particularly through my right hon. Friend Lord Bourne, the Minister for Faith, engages with the Sikh community and particularly Sikh umbrella groups. He often hosts interfaith roundtables with representatives from different faiths. Part of that has been to engage heavily with the Sikh community and its representatives.

Lord Bourne is currently seeking to refresh the groups of Sikh communities and umbrella bodies with which he meets. He is seeking particularly to expand those groups to ensure that more women have an opportunity to contribute and that more members of grassroots and community representative groups can attend them. Knowing the interest that there will be in today’s debate, I put out a call to the community more widely, particularly to women, to come forward and engage with the Government on how we can more actively support the Sikh community in the UK. We look forward to continuing our engagement with the Sikh community throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I hope that that can be part of an active engagement, with Members from across the House playing their full part.

Mr Virendra Sharma: I really appreciate the commitment that the Minister is giving to carry on working closely with the Sikh community. Will he join all of us in campaigning to put pressure on the Prime Minister of this country to apologise on behalf of British communities? The Sikh community and the Indian community in general would appreciate that support.

Jake Berry: I read out the direct quote from the Prime Minister expressing regret in relation to that. Any further change in the Government’s official position would be a matter for the Foreign Office and for the Prime Minister, although I have committed to pass on Members’ comments, and I am sure that the Prime Minister and her team will read the Hansard of our debate.

A few very specific points have been raised, to which I will respond. First, the hon. Member for Slough asked whether I would meet him to discuss flights directly. I will of course, but I wonder whether it would be more appropriate for him to meet a Transport Minister. Perhaps he and I can have a quick conversation after the debate to work out who the appropriate Minister would be. In the absence of any other Minister better qualified to deal with the matter, I will of course meet him with the greatest of pleasure.

Comments have been made about the Sikh war memorial and the cross-party campaign for proper recognition of the extraordinary contribution that Sikhs made during both world wars—14 Victoria Crosses is a number that should humble us all. The Government are correctly supporting efforts to seek a permanent war memorial in London for that contribution. My Department has facilitated meetings with Westminster City Council and we have helped to persuade it, though I am sure it did not take too much persuasion, that there is a need for this war memorial. We support the planning application and have helped to identify potential sites. My Department is the ultimate arbiter of the planning application, so I cannot be drawn more widely on its success or failure, but we would all think it a wonderful outcome were such a memorial to be seen in London.

Mr Dhesi: I thank Lord Bourne, his colleague Hilary Patel and the entire Department, because they have been very co-operative. I need reassurance from the Minister that we will get further gas under the pedal to get that memorial in Westminster sooner rather than later.

Jake Berry: I hope I can give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance. The Government are fully behind the proposals for the war memorial. If there is more we can do to assist, we will certainly offer that help. I congratulate him for all the work he has done and the extraordinary way in which he has reinvigorated the campaign since he arrived in Parliament relatively recently. We will continue to work with Westminster City Council. There are negotiations with the Crown Estate, and if we can assist in that work or those negotiations in any way, we will do so. If, following this fantastic month of celebration and history, we can make some real progress, we can all be really proud of that. If the hon. Gentleman runs into any issues—of course, my colleague Lord Bourne would usually deal with them—he can contact me and I will personally take them up with the relevant people in my Department.

Issues relating to hate crime have been raised. In the remaining moments, it may be helpful for me to highlight the additional funding that the Home Secretary has made available for places of worship. I have visited each of the mosques in my constituency to talk about the availability of that funding. It is right that the Government support places of worship, so that religious people can meet, come together, pray together and practise their faith. I hope that colleagues will do what I have done, which is to visit diverse places of worship in their own constituencies, to ensure that worshippers are aware of that funding and of the fact that they can apply for proactive security around places of worship. I congratulate once again everyone who has taken part in this extraordinary and uplifting debate.

3.58 pm

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister and all who have taken part. I am sure that the debate on the issue of a formal apology for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre will continue. I hope the Prime Minister will use her Vaisakhi event next month to move things forward.

I echo the words of my hon. Friends the Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill): raising awareness has a purpose, which is to build relations and to tackle hate, inequality and injustice. Where that requires Parliament to act, I hope we will have the courage to do so. In this debate, we have heard that people from the Sikh community have contributed to our society in so many ways—from Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, who campaigned for suffrage in my constituency, to Fauja Singh in sport. We have not mentioned him, but this is a marathon week.

I close by thanking the Sikh community in my constituency and the leaders of our main local gurdwaras for all they do in working in an interfaith way, recognising the words of Guru Nanak Dev Ji that there is no Hindu and there is no Muslim. That we are all one together is a strong message that comes from the Sikh faith. I would
like to mention Zora Singh Khangora, Gurmej Kaur, Gurmit Singh Hanzara, Premi Singh from the Afghan Sikhs, Sarup Singh Mahon, Gurmail Singh Malhi and our deputy mayor, Councillor Sumra, and all the other Sikh councillors who do a huge amount to keep the bridge strong between our community and our politics.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): On a personal note, it has been a great privilege to chair this wonderful debate, in which we have all come together to celebrate the contribution of the Sikh community to our nation.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered the contribution of Sikhs to the UK.

Migration Advisory Committee

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE in the Chair]

4 pm
George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the composition of the Migration Advisory Committee.

The Migration Advisory Committee has six members. The chairman, Professor Alan Manning, is from the London School of Economics; he is, of course, an economist. Professor Jackline Wahba is from the University of Southampton; she is an economist. Dr Jennifer Smith is from Warwick University; she is an economist. Madeleine Sumption is from the University of Oxford; she is an economist. Dr Brian Bell is from King’s College London; he is an economist. Finally, Professor Jo Swaffield, who is newly appointed, is from the University of York; unsurprisingly, she too is an economist.

I do not doubt that all those individuals are proficient economists. Nor do I doubt that those of them who still lecture are perfectly capable of imparting in the lecture theatre the knowledge that students need to pass their exams. However, an important question must be asked: does it make sense to have an advisory committee on migration that is made up exclusively of economists, and that excludes all other fields of knowledge and experience? If the Minister told me that there was a case for one economist on the panel, I would accept that, because there is undoubtedly an element of economics in migration policy. However, it is not the only issue that we should address, nor are economists’ skills the only skills needed.

The knowledge and experience of the individuals on the committee is inevitably quite limited and narrow, and their perspective is inevitably very theoretical rather than rooted in experience. They live in an academic bubble, which means that they do not always understand the challenges that individual businesses face. Not one of them, I think, has ever run a business; not one has created any wealth on their own through entrepreneurship; not one has created any jobs. They do not know what it is like to worry about putting together a rota to ensure that a restaurant is fully staffed. They do not know what it is like to be a strawberry farmer who has to close a gate on a field of strawberries because they do not have enough staff. Nor do they know what it is like to have to cancel a weekend away with their family because somebody has called in sick and they have to do the work themselves.

My view is that an expert committee on migration should be much broader. It should have entrepreneurs—people who have actually built wealth, created jobs and made and run their own businesses. It should have business leaders from a range of different sectors.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to have a range that covers not only different sorts of people, but the whole United Kingdom? We should understand the issues that affect all parts of our United Kingdom.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. For instance, some of the Migration Advisory Committee’s advice has been that it does not matter if
we shut down certain industries, but some of those industries are prevalent in certain regions and matter to those of us who represent them. I believe that the committee should also have a range of business leaders from a range of sectors of the economy, to represent different briefs and explain why particular sectors employ people in a particular way. Why not have a place for a trade union representative as well?

The Minister or her officials might regard all the people I have just mentioned as dreadful vested interests with an axe to grind, who could not possibly sit on an expert committee. I disagree. Does not the Minister value those people’s opinions? She might find that real entrepreneurs and people in business and trade unions could ground-truth some of the current committee’s economic theories.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Even to economists, for whom I have a high regard, some things should be self-evident. For instance, in Stafford we grow an awful lot of salad, which replaces salad that would otherwise be imported. It is really important for the United Kingdom’s balance of payments; without the workforce to pick it, grow it and process it, we would be more reliant on imports and our balance of payments would be negative.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is important that as a country we make, produce and grow things. Sadly, I am afraid that some economists overlook the importance of that, and some do not think that the balance of payments matters at all. They think that we can just carry on losing money, borrowing it from elsewhere and spending like no tomorrow, but we all know that that is not how the world works.

Even if the Minister felt that some of the people I have mentioned had a vested interest or an axe to grind, it would be quite possible to make allowances to take that into account. It is wrong to ignore those voices and shut them out. Even if the committee were to remain largely academic, where is the space for people who studied international relations? Do not their degrees matter? There will be many people at the Home Office who have chosen to work in immigration, and whose skillsets and qualifications are in international relations, but they are all excluded from this expert committee. What about people who studied human geography, a normal route to looking at issues such as immigration? Where is the space for them on the committee?

The Minister may say that she meets businesses and unions all the time and hears their voices. However, we cannot get away from the fact that this narrow advisory committee almost sees itself as writing policy. Ministers and officials who draft answers to parliamentary questions routinely hide behind the MAC, saying that it is not appropriate for Ministers to say anything about migration matters until the committee has reached a conclusion. They appear to have abdicated responsibility for policy making to the committee.

The level of reverence shown by the Home Office to the Migration Advisory Committee is rather akin to that shown to the Monetary Policy Committee. However, the MPC was established by statute and has statutory powers to set interest rates, whereas the MAC is simply an ad hoc advisory group and should be treated as such.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, highlighting deficiencies in the Migration Advisory Committee with respect to the reflection of regions, income strands or industry needs. However, the committee only advises; Ministers decide. This afternoon, the Minister has an opportunity to show how she can hear and ignore, to make sure that we have a system that is bespoke and best suited for the future of our industry and our country.

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I hope that the Minister will clarify that the Government have an absolute right to ignore at will any recommendations from the Migration Advisory Committee.

Until recently, I was a Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—I was one of those Ministers who used to sign off parliamentary answers that said, “We can’t say anything until we hear from the Migration Advisory Committee.” We saw this as a vital piece of work. As we leave the European Union and take back control—in some cases for the first time in half a century—of policy areas such as agriculture, fisheries and migration, we must assertively own that space. There is no space for sitting on our hands, dithering and delaying; we must wholeheartedly come up with a coherent policy.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that people in fishing, farming, healthcare, social care and our tourism industry are acutely conscious of this challenge. They expect and want whoever is making the decisions, or at least guiding policy, to be well informed and responsive to things as they change.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Sadly, many individuals across various sectors report that they do not feel that the Migration Advisory Committee actually listens to them. They feel that the committee has a rather supercilious stance and is basically not interested in the views of people running real businesses.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate. Economists like to measure and count things. Does he agree that they need to come up with a way of counting shortages of different skills, rather than trying to put a measurement on the value of those skills? It is purely as simple as, “We have a shortage of these skills. We need those skills.”

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a crucial point, which I was going to come on to. The Migration Advisory Committee is trying to be too clever by half, rather than just making a straightforward assessment of the industries that have labour shortages, trying to assess what those shortages are as best it can, and setting a figure for the appropriate tier 3 or tier 2 provision, so that we can get the right people into those industries. Instead, the committee has gone off on a frolic of its own in trying to outline a plan to socially engineer a solution to what economists call the productivity puzzle.

As a Minister, I was deeply disappointed when the Migration Advisory Committee’s final report concluded in autumn 2018. I thought it was very poor and told us nothing new. Frankly, it read a bit like a student’s dissertation. It was a trot round the course of rather standard economic theories of comparative advantage and so on. I suppose that reflected the fact that it was ultimately written by economists and academics, who do not have real-world experience. At the heart of that report was undoubtedly an economist’s obsession with
abstract theories of productivity—the so-called productivity puzzle to which we have to keep being subjected, because it is the current obsession of economists.

Put simply, the MAC believes that it can use immigration policy to socially engineer a solution to productivity. It recommends no provision at all for tier 3 migration—as it is the current obsession of economists. They will give a particular perspective—cut and pasted out of a textbook—but it will not actually be ground truth; it will not be rooted in the real economy. Up and down the country, real businesses are taking decisions not to invest, not to expand and not to create new jobs, because they cannot get people to fill the vacancies that they have in their business as it stands. The stance against so-called low-skilled immigration is actually damaging our economy already, and we need to recognise that.

I have a second request of the Minister. As I said, I note that she recently took the opportunity simply to reappoint two members of the Migration Advisory Committee at the end of last year. She has not taken the opportunity to refresh the team. I also understand that the MAC has enabled successive Governments to have some mechanism whereby these people are recognised and acknowledged, but was indifferent to. Let us not forget that under Professor Manning’s world-view, the Home Secretary’s father would have been denied entry to our country. Mr David came here to work first in the cotton mills, and then on the buses. Had Professor Manning been in place at the time, the Home Secretary’s father would have been sent back and would not have been admitted to this country. That is a terrible indictment of the conclusions of the current MAC report.

The Migration Advisory Committee claims that its recommendations are consistent with our industrial strategy. I think that is wrong, as they violate two important principles in our industrial strategy. First, a principle of the industrial strategy is to make the UK the best place in the world to set up a business. Secondly, the strategy seeks balanced growth around the country, not growth concentrated simply in the home counties. A skills-based immigration system along the lines proposed by the Migration Advisory Committee will be bad for business and will damage and close certain industries. It will be bad for many parts of the country that depend on those industries for their wealth generation, including whole supply chains.

As I said, Brexit changes things fundamentally. We have to own this space assertively. We have to learn to value people who work on lower incomes and might have fewer formal qualifications, but who do vital work—be it in hospitality, agriculture or caring environments, and so on. First, we need to reappoint the Migration Advisory Committee so that we can give the Home Office better advice.

I conclude with two requests of the Minister. First, since the Migration Advisory Committee is an ad hoc committee and not established in statute, I see no reason why its current membership could not be extended to, say, 10 or 12 individuals. They are paid a day rate for attendance; it is not a salaried position. The Minister has an opportunity right now to extend the Migration Advisory Committee and broaden its skills base.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Immigration is very important to Scotland, and I notice the absence of my colleagues from the Scottish National party. It is a very important area not just for Scotland, but for the whole of the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a very narrow field to have a team of economists dealing with such an important issue? We surely must have the voice of others—particularly business, the National Farmers Union in Scotland and in England and Wales, and, as he mentioned, trade unions. We need to have some mechanism whereby these people are heard and the real needs of these industries, including hospitality, the NHS, fishing and farming, are truly heard. I doubt whether any of those economists understands the need throughout the UK, particularly in Scotland.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a vital point, which is the thrust of my argument: we cannot have a coherent policy by relying just on the opinions of economists. They will give a particular perspective—cut and pasted out of a textbook—but it will not actually be ground truth; it will not be rooted in the real economy. Up and down the country, real businesses are taking decisions not to invest, not to expand and not to create new jobs, because they cannot get people to fill the vacancies that they have in their business as it stands. The stance against so-called low-skilled immigration is actually damaging our economy already, and we need to recognise that.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) on securing this debate. He put his view forward with customary forthrightness, and I would expect nothing less from him. I am grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to shine a bit of light on the work of the Migration Advisory Committee. It plays a very important role in the development of immigration policy and its work is often in the spotlight, but there is far less discussion of the committee’s membership and composition.

We are lucky to have the MAC. Although there are no members of Her Majesty’s Opposition here to hear me say this, the then Labour Government’s establishment of the MAC back in 2007 was possibly one of the best things they did in the field of immigration. Creating the MAC has enabled successive Governments to have a source of informed, authoritative and impartial advice on some of the most contentious and thorny questions of immigration policy. The readiness with which successive Governments have accepted the MAC’s advice is a testament to the quality of that advice and to the value and wisdom of having such a body. It is noteworthy that a number of other countries have now sought to emulate our approach by appointing their own expert bodies to advise them on immigration policy.

As my hon. Friend said, the MAC is made up of a chair and five members, whom he described as proficient economists. I might go somewhat further and describe them as eminent labour market economists and migration experts working in universities and think-tanks, who bring considerable skills, expertise and experience to their role. Indeed, I venture to suggest that they are some of the finest minds in their discipline in the United Kingdom.
It has been suggested—indeed, this was the main thrust of my hon. Friend’s comments—that the MAC or a successor body would benefit from having a wider range of members, and that it should include not just academics but, for example, people working in industry. I want to make three points in response.

First, advertisements for MAC members do not stipulate that they have to be academics. As I have said, fair and open competition is used, and there is nothing to prevent a person working in any field from being appointed, provided he or she is the best candidate. My hon. Friend might be interested to know that the advertisement listed experience of working in or with business as one of the desirable criteria that candidates were asked to display.

Secondly, the MAC always seeks to proceed by consensus, and all its reports are unanimously agreed. There is a danger that that approach could be damaged if it were made up of people who felt the need to represent and argue for the concerns of particular sectors or vested interests.

Thirdly, I am not sure where we would draw the line in any such approach. My hon. Friend suggested that the MAC, or a body that replaces it, should have business representatives among its members, but there are millions of businesses in the UK and many representative bodies that speak for their interests, including the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, Make UK and chambers of commerce up and down the country, to name but a few. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend is interested in that.

The MAC has been very busy indeed over the past few years. My hon. Friend mentioned one of the two important reports it produced last year. The first was on international students, and the second on the impact of European economic area migration. It has set out a plan to socially engineer a change to our work permit? The MAC has done something very different.

It is important that people do not let their disappointment with the recommendations translate into an attack on the effectiveness of the independent body that produced them.

My hon. Friend went as far as to say that the MAC’s report was cut and pasted from a textbook. Far from it. It was the result of a great deal of evidence taking, research and work, which took many months. It is incredibly important to recognise that the MAC’s recommendations are exactly that—recommendations.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) suggested that I have the ability to hear and ignore. I also have the ability to hear and listen. This year, as part of our White Paper engagement, we are taking the opportunity to listen to a wide range of views from across the country and from a variety of sectors.

Time does not permit me to cover the White Paper in detail, beyond making it very clear that our engagement has started. So far, more than 60 meetings have been held to discuss the proposals contained within it. To date, I have met representatives of several significant sectors, and I will continue to do so over the course of the next few months. We will not make a final decision on the proposals in the White Paper until that process has been completed. In parallel with that, the MAC is reviewing the composition of the shortage occupation list, and is undertaking an extensive evidence-gathering process to help its deliberations.

We have heard views this afternoon from across the country, including Northern Ireland, Scotland and the south-west. Hon. Members mentioned a variety of sectors, including social care, farming, fishing and hospitality, but there are many others that we often hear less of. I am particularly struck that the road haulage and distribution, veterinary science and retail sectors rely significantly on migrant labour. When we consider the views that are fed into the MAC, it is important that we do not cherry-pick which parts of industry and which sectors we listen to. We must listen to them all, and to every part of the country.

George Eustice: I am very grateful to the Minister for setting out her approach. Does she agree with a point that a number of hon. Members made, which is that a coherent approach to setting numbers for migrants coming here would be to look at a range of different sectors so we can make the best judgment about the number of migrants we want to come into the country for the time being—albeit perhaps on a short-term work permit? The MAC has done something very different. It has set out a plan to socially engineer a change to our economy. Its plan is to force the closure of certain industries by denying them access to the labour they need. That is what is wrong.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend will be aware, from the White Paper and the Government’s proposals, that although we have listened to the MAC, we have not
relies exclusively on its opinions. The MAC did not include any suggestion of a temporary workers route for skills that do not fall within the categories that it has designated—I hate to use the term “lower skilled”, and if I have a few minutes at the end, I will try to expand on why. We are very conscious that there are industries and sectors that need people with different skills. The temporary workers route, which we included in the White Paper as a point for engagement and discussion, was not included in the MAC’s report. I am very conscious that, although we have to listen to the views of expert economists, we have to come up with a coherent policy that will work for every sector of industry, every part of the economy and the whole of the United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend makes a big pitch for tier 3, and we can have a long conversation about “lower skilled”. He and I are conscious that there are many occupations that do not fall neatly into the categories of “high skilled” or “medium skilled”. When we talk about lower skill levels, I always try to find different language. There are many people working in health and social care or in farming and fishing who have skills that do not fall neatly within academic qualifications but are absolutely essential if those business are to be able to find staff, and to remain vibrant and profitable. That is part of the jigsaw puzzle that we are putting together over the course of the year.

The White Paper makes it clear—my hon. Friend may disagree with this—that we envisage an expanded role for the MAC in the future. As well as responding to specific commissions from the Government as it does now, it will have a wider role to produce an annual report on all aspects of Government immigration policy. It will have the ability to consider and make proactive recommendations on any aspect of that policy. The White Paper is clear that we want to consider the MAC’s composition, status and remit, potentially including expanding the chair’s post. I have certainly heard my hon. Friend’s pitch about appointments to posts in the MAC. I emphasise again that that is always done through fair and open competition. We want the best people—people with experience and expertise—and it is crucial that we build on our existing model, rather than create something new from scratch.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for enabling us to debate these important matters. He, like other hon. Members, has strong views about this. I remain convinced that the MAC model has served the UK and successive Governments well, and that we should enhance and strengthen it so that, in an area as important as immigration policy, the Governments can continue to make policy on the basis of the best possible independent and impartial evidence-based advice.

Question put and agreed to.
were decided that they should be built in the UK, that could benefit shipbuilding not just in Scotland, but across the UK.

**Ged Killen:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I will touch on that point later in my remarks.

Although we must continue to support shipbuilding, the UK and Scottish Governments must focus on diversifying and deepening the defence industry in Scotland to ensure that there will always be a base for the high-skill and high-value roles associated with the industry—that is eminently achievable. Scotland is well placed to be a home for a variety of new industries. With strong universities and a history of manufacturing and design excellence, we are ideally placed to take advantage of the large demands of the UK’s defence. This debate gives Members the opportunity to discuss future high-growth areas and draw attention to the advantages of increasing diversity in the defence industry. For my part, I will touch on two high-growth areas: space and land vehicles.

Glasgow in particular has become a pioneering centre for the deployment of microsatellites, producing more satellites than any other city outside the United States. As future defence concerns rely increasingly on the gathering and analysis of information, significant space assets will be vital to the day-to-day operations of the armed forces in both military and non-military operations.

The space sector has huge potential for future growth. Year-on-year growth in the sector has been five times greater than in the wider economy since 1999, and the sector has tripled in value since 2000. Each new job in the space sector adds £140,000 of added value per employee, and the overall sector receives 36% of turnover from exports.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** The high-quality satellites that are built in Glasgow are superb, and will be launched from my part of the world. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Britain has a great business opportunity to build a lot of satellites for allied countries for their own defence, and that if we get going now, we can steal on a march on the world?

**Ged Killen:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As a satellite hub, companies in Glasgow have produced huge volumes of satellites. Two companies, Alba Orbital and Spire Global, have between them put around 100 satellites in orbit, and Spire Global makes one new satellite per week. The recent go-ahead for the spaceport in Sutherland, as well as Glasgow’s growing microsatellite industry, perfectly places Scotland to take advantage of new investment and infrastructure.

Investment from the MOD will be a major factor in the successful development of space and satellite technologies. Any investment will naturally lead to a build-up of skills and will spill over into the civilian sector. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister indicated the role that the upcoming strategic defence and security review will have in supporting the development and expansion of the space industry in Scotland, and what representations he will make to ensure that that vital high-growth sector is not overlooked. The industry is highly competitive and, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, it is vital that the UK takes a lead.

**John Spellar (Warley) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend for the speech that he is making, which is very helpful. The British space industry has not only been successful here, but has played a huge part in the European project Galileo. Does he share my regret that the European Commission, in a fit of pique, has decided to kick us out of the project, to which we have made not only a financial contribution, but an enormous industrial contribution? Europe should really be holding that up as an example of competing in the world.

**Ged Killen:** My right hon. Friend will not be surprised to know that we have different views on Britain’s membership of the European Union. I largely consider that we are kicking ourselves out of the EU and should accept the consequences of that, although I regret the impact that it will have on projects such as Galileo.

Further to the space sector, the construction of advanced land vehicles offers an excellent opportunity for the expansion of the defence industry in Scotland. Glasgow now hosts an armoured vehicle centre of excellence, which was set up by defence company Thales. The centre aims to provide the MOD with an excellent new resource for the development of armoured vehicles.

Thales is currently bidding for the MOD’s multi role vehicle-protected programme which, if successful, would see 50 highly skilled engineering design and manufacturing jobs brought to the Glasgow site, and the possibility of 30 additional jobs created over the programme’s lifetime. Thales has said that if it is selected for the MRV-P and as the UK design authority and integrator for the Boxer and its variants, 100 new jobs could be created directly, while 180 jobs could be created through supply chains and around 200 further jobs could be supported indirectly.

Such programmes are vital for expanding the diversity of the defence industry in Scotland and introducing new skills, as well as deepening the existing skills base. A great example is my constituent Stewart MacPherson, an employee at Thales Glasgow who has been chosen as one of the top 30 electronics engineers under 30 in the UK.

Encouraging and supporting new skills and professionals is a great benefit of defence investment, so I should be grateful for an update from the Minister on the progress towards reaching a decision on the MRV-P programme. I appreciate, however, that he may only be able to reveal certain information as some might be commercially sensitive.

**Chris Stephens:** I again thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning Thales, which is based in my constituency. Does he agree that if Thales is successful in obtaining the contract, the economic benefits for the whole Glasgow area—including for my constituents and his—would be considerable?

**Ged Killen:** I absolutely agree. Recently, when I visited the site, I was pleased to see how many of my constituents are employed there.

I am disappointed about the previous actions of both the UK Government and, to a certain extent, the Scottish Government. The recent failure by the UK Government to support the construction of the first solid support vessels, as mentioned in this debate and many other times in this place, shows completely misplaced priorities. Ill thought-out changes to Government tendering rules
redefined the vessels, meaning that the ships will not fall under article 346 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union. That opens UK shipyards to subsidised international competition and puts jobs and the potential investment in shipyards such as Rosyth at risk.

What is more, that situation was wholly avoidable, with the decision being made completely unilaterally, yet possibly writing off highly skilled, highly paid jobs that could return £2.3 billion in revenue to the Treasury while providing sustainable employment and an increasing skills base. I therefore urge the Government to think again about that, and to follow the Labour party's lead by advocating that such ships are built in the UK. The case of the fleet solid support ships signals a Government who are far more interested in achieving in-year cost reductions than in looking at the whole picture.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech about the British defence industry. Does he agree that we built two world-class aircraft carriers in Rosyth, employing a lot of my constituents and I am sure some of his, and that the Government should offer some of our expertise and the build facility to our allies around the world who have expressed interest in aircraft carrier technology, so that we can continue to build our expertise and keep the engineering specialities developed in Rosyth and in Scotland?

Ged Killen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, which was well made. I am sure that the Minister will respond in his remarks.

John Spellar: Is it not the case that the solid support ships would be ideal for the Rosyth site to maintain its workforce until aircraft carrier refits are necessary? Does that not show that the Government have not learned the lesson of the gap in work at Barrow, which then required a reconstruction of the workforce at huge cost? Surely the Government are saving pennies now but costing pounds later.

Ged Killen: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. To be frank, I find it amazing that the red, white and blue Conservative party of Great Britain does not see the merit of building such ships in Britain, creating so much benefit for years to come.

In the context of this debate, we must also look at the Scottish Government’s role. Recently, the First Minister set out her plans for a new independence referendum. We must therefore consider the impact of that policy on long-term investment. Scotland’s shipyards rely on the pipeline of complex warships to be constructed for the Ministry of Defence—at least one remaining aircraft carrier, five offshore patrol vehicles and eight frigates—but if Scotland were to become independent before the next Holyrood election, as the SNP plans, the MOD has indicated that Scotland could be excluded from producing UK warships under article 346, or a similar rule if the UK has left the EU. Without those contracts, the shipyards would need to find alternative sources of demand in order to remain open, and I hope that the SNP will elaborate on that in any contribution today.

The MOD spends about £1.6 billion a year directly on Scottish industry, with £900 million spent directly on shipbuilding. The Growth Commission report stated that the entire defence budget for an independent Scotland would be £3 billion, plus £450 million to be used over five years to set up the apparatus of an entire independent state, of which a defence force is just one part. From that combined pool, therefore, the SNP proposes to find at least £900 million a year just to keep the shipyards open, while also setting up a new defence force, equipping it, and ensuring that its IT and support systems work properly. That is before we get on to the implications of importing the necessary components required for advanced manufacturing under a new currency.

That is £450 million to set up a new state in five years, including a defence force, but in less than five years it has cost the Scottish Government £200 million to set up a Scottish social security system and £178 million to set up an IT system to allocate payments to farmers. When we consider the complexity required to set up a new modern military force with all the support and complex IT architecture necessary, we realise that the figures do not add up. Scotland is being let down by both its Governments.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): On top of that are the billions that it would cost to convert our currency from pounds to something else. It is just a fairy tale, is it not?

Ged Killen: There are so many different layers to this. Going into the day-to-day costs in pounds sterling is bad enough, but adding the uncertainty of trying to set up a whole new currency from scratch takes us into the realm of fantasy.

We have a good opportunity, through smart industrial policy, to build a healthy, thriving and contributory defence industry in Scotland. The Labour party has put smart industrial policy at the heart of our policy proposals for the next election, whenever it comes. However, it is disappointing that both the UK and Scottish Governments cannot do the same.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokesmen no later than 5.7 pm. The guideline limits are five minutes for the SNP, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. If the Minister closes no later than 5.27 pm, that would allow the mover of the motion three minutes to sum up the debate. Until 5.7 pm, however, we have time for Back-Bench contributions, the first of which will be from Stephen Kerr. One other Member was standing, so I hope that we can split the time equally.

4.47 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen). He spoke very well, with passion and conviction, and thoughtfully. I was delighted with the tone that he set for the debate.

I wish to take us in a slightly different direction with public policy in the defence industry and on diversification, because I wish to refer specifically to the Scottish
Trades Union Congress campaign to set up—or to encourage the SNP Scottish Government to set up—a defence diversification agency. That approach to defence diversification, rather than the one in the hon. Gentleman’s thoughtful speech, is simplistic and frankly regrettable. Not only is the point of view that the Government are best placed to tell business how to operate mistaken and misguided, but the ideologically blinkered way in which the left approaches this vital area of public policy is lacking.

I would not often choose to quote from the *Morning Star*—frankly, I have not often even perused a copy of it—[Interruption.] I know that Opposition Members are disappointed to hear that I am not a regular subscriber. On 15 May, it ran a story on the vote at the STUC annual congress calling on the SNP Government “to establish a Defence Diversification Agency to promote a ‘fair and sustainable shift’ away from nuclear weapons.”

Continuing to quote the *Morning Star*—the first and perhaps only occasion on which I will do so—the report went on:

“But professionals’ union Prospect and general union GMB opposed the motion, saying it sent the wrong message to defence workers.

GMB Scotland delegate John Dolan, a Scotstoun shipyard convenor, said: ‘This motion is not in the real world of work.

‘These people have worked in these industries for years, keeping you, your children and your grandchildren safe.

‘How many jobs have been created by defence diversification?’

‘This is a con. Where is the Saudi Arabia of renewables we were promised 10 years ago by Alex Salmond and the SNP government?’”

I do not know John Dolan—perhaps other Members present do—but I want to repeat a line of his, because it is important:

“These people have worked in these industries for years, keeping you, your children and your grandchildren safe.”

I agree with the statement made by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West in his opening speech that we should be proud of the defence sector in Scotland. As he mentioned, UK defence spends £1.6 billion with Scottish industry each year, supporting at least 10,000 high-value jobs in the Scottish economy.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that if he buys the *Morning Star* today, he will find a column in the name of my good self on blacklisting, which I recommend to him. I suggest that if he is, as he claims, so concerned for the views of shipyard workers on the Clyde and what they are saying at the Scottish Trades Union Congress, he listen to them and support their argument that the fleet’s solid support ships should be built in the UK and not be put out to international competition.

Stephen Kerr: I am not at all surprised that the hon. Gentleman writes a column in the *Morning Star*. I would have been disappointed if he had said anything other than that. Of course I wish that all the defence contract work available should remain in the UK, support high-value UK jobs and advance our technical expertise in shipbuilding. I have no doubt that the Minister will address that issue when he responds.

I pay tribute to the people who work for businesses that have invested in Scotland such as Babcock, BAE Systems, Leonardo, Thales, Raytheon, Rolls-Royce and others. All those major contractors and others are operating in Scotland. I have heard Members of this House speak of those businesses in disparaging terms. I want to make it clear that if any Member of this House does not want those businesses and their workers in their constituency, I will be absolutely delighted to have them come to Stirling. Stirling has a long association with our armed forces, and a proud connection with our servicemen and women and those who support them in the supply chain that those industries represent. That connection is symbolised by Stirling castle.

I do not know John Dolan but he captured some of the pride of the people who work in those industries. I am proud of that workforce, such as those at Her Majesty’s Naval Base Clyde at Faslane, many of whom are my constituents. If I could, I would say to each of them, in the words of Mr Dolan, “Thank you for keeping me, my children and my grandchildren safe. Thank you for defending our country and our freedoms. Scotland is proud of you.” In my constituency, defence contracts support many jobs, especially at FES, which is a principal electrical contractor and works on the new Navy ships that are being built on the Clyde. Emerson also has significant defence contracts. FES has made a huge investment in its apprenticeship programmes and runs its own academy. Hundreds of skilled electricians have benefited from FES’s commitment to them and the Ministry of Defence’s commitment to Scotland.

Some on the left approach this issue from a pacifist viewpoint built on deeply held beliefs. I respect that. Others on the left, such as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, are more pragmatic and see the high-value jobs that are done as a vital strategic part of the Scottish economy. The position of the SNP is far more craven. It knows that the defence sector would be destroyed in the event of independence, as the hon. Gentleman outlined. SNP Members use defence diversification as a way of distracting people, because the truth is that they do not care much about jobs or about defence; they just care about independence, as was seen in their conference in Edinburgh at the weekend. According to that separatist vision, Scotland’s workers, savers and pensioners would give up the pound for a valueless currency yet to be named, and no frigates would be built on the Clyde if they ever got their way.

Chris Stephens: I find it extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman accuses me and others in the SNP of not caring about defence jobs, given that I meet the shop stewards in the Clyde shipyards on a regular basis and they know my views. Would he care to withdraw or clarify what he suggests? He was pointing at me when he made those outrageous remarks.

Stephen Kerr: I am not sure I was specifically pointing at the hon. Gentleman. Let me be absolutely clear: those who espouse separatism in Scotland know that the consequences would be the loss of those jobs and the technology, know-how and added value that goes with them. They know only too well that Scotland would not have a Royal Navy.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend is making a valid point. It would not just be the hard power of the military’s physical ships and tanks that would be taken away; it would also be MI5, MI6 and the myriad security services that are embedded and supported by the United Kingdom. I wish the SNP could see that valid point, too.
Stephen Kerr: The SNP cynically swallows the idea of being in NATO—a nuclear defensive alliance—because it knows that Scotland will never wear pacifism. It wants Faslane and the nuclear deterrent gone.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just a question of defending the United Kingdom’s territorial waters and our contribution to NATO, but goes much further afield? We forget that the maintenance of a blue-water Navy is vital to trade. One only has to look at the Red sea. I used to ship coffee from the Port of Tanga through the Suez canal to Europe and around the world. Piracy around the Red sea was rife; ships were hijacked until the European Union force and others, led until recently by the United Kingdom, were there with ships built in Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: I would sign up to beating swords in ploughshares every day of the week, but the lesson of history is that we defend the peace by being strong. I am proud of the United Kingdom’s 2% defence spending commitment. We have obligations in the alliance, which we meet.

I recently had the privilege of attending the naming ceremony of HMS Taymar, the latest second-generation River-class ship, on the Clyde. It is a magnificent ship built in the best traditions of Scottish shipbuilding for the Royal Navy, by Scottish engineers, fitters, designers, programmers—a host of highly skilled professionals. The workforce spoke with such pride about their work, and they are fully justified in that pride, because they are making a massive contribution to the security of our country and our servicemen and women who sail in those ships. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) outlined some of the other things that they do.

Scotland’s contribution to the defence sector and our Scottish servicemen and women are a matter of national pride for all of us. The men and women who serve alongside our service personnel are to be saluted. I will long remember the visit I made in my constituency to people who work for Babcock—mechanics and engineers who had gone to Afghanistan and Iraq to be there with our service people to service their armoured vehicles and to keep them on the road. They must not have their sacrifice traduced by an ideologically driven attack on a proud and vital industry.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I will call the Front-Bench speakers at seven minutes past five, and Martin Docherty-Hughes may speak until then.

4.57 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to serve with you in the chair, Mr Hollobone. It is always good to speak in this place about the valuable contribution made to Scotland and across the UK by the people who work in the defence industry. Their skills and diligence make their contribution to our economy invaluable—let us not forget that Scotland has record-low unemployment—and that is felt well beyond the sector in which they work. I am glad there is agreement across the Chamber on that point. I am thankful to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) for giving us the opportunity to demonstrate that point of agreement.

From the perspective of the Scottish National party, as we consider the starting point for the Scottish defence industry to move towards an economically and otherwise sustainable future after Scotland’s independence, there is much cause for optimism. I am no pacifist; my brother served in Iraq and in Afghanistan twice, and my nephew is a Royal Engineer. Our Benches are not filled with pacifists, although I cast no aspersions on the voting intentions of those who are.

In my role on the Select Committee on Defence, I have been lucky to visit many defence manufacturing sites in Scotland. I am glad to say that they are all historically rooted in their local communities, but nonetheless are well integrated into the wider European and global economies, with export profiles to match. For me, an independent Scotland operating in the strong framework of the European family of nations, with the broad shoulders of a global, capable trading bloc that already has trade agreements and over half a billion people, should be well placed to build on that position.

The most important aspect of ensuring that we have a sustainable and diverse Scottish defence industry—this is where we might find some agreement—will be the establishment of multi-year defence agreements, or MYDAs. I have yet to hear a single other member of the Defence Committee mention those at that Committee. Used commonly by all our allies, MYDAs create a framework agreement among political parties for a common approach to defence procurement that gives security to industry and removes complex and long-term decisions from capricious politicians wedded to short-termism.

With MYDAs of five years or longer, an independent Scotland, which of course is my preference, or indeed the UK, would no longer have to face Governments halving the size of the Type 45 destroyer programme—I will leave it to others to find out which Government did that—or chopping up maritime patrol capability. That capacity was discussed at the Defence Committee this morning: we are having to try to get an even older programme from the United States to replace it. Defence Secretaries who seek to sign blank cheques for programmes in the hope of being catapulted into No. 10 would no longer be able to saddle the procurement budget with £15 billion black holes.

The consensus about the excellence and skills of our defence industry employees should be reflected in an ability to work together to ensure their long-term future. Quite simply, the MOD has been used for far too long as a political football. We already know that a steady and reliable pipeline of orders can form the basis of a diversified and sustainable industry.

Earlier this year, I was lucky enough to join my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on a visit to Thales electronics in his constituency. I was fascinated to see the outstanding tradition of periscope manufacturing being transformed to produce a new generation of optical sensors for the Royal Navy and other customers, including the navy of Japan. Technology designed and developed in Glasgow, with a broad economic reach across the whole of central and western Scotland and with the support of many people from West Dunbartonshire, whose shipbuilding heritage is profound—of course, we do not have any shipyards left, but we will leave that for another debate—is
used on a whole range of optical sensors for use across the military and civilian fields, not only in the UK but by our allies.

Similarly, SNP Members were delighted by the welcome news that Raytheon, recognising the strength of the skill base in central Scotland, has decided to invest in a new facility in Livingston, primarily to design and manufacture power systems for military and defence radars. Building on a history of excellence in manufacturing in the military domain to provide civilian applications is precisely what this debate is about, as I am sure the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West intended.

Those are examples of multinational companies that have chosen to locate in Scotland because of the skills, quality and work ethic of those who come through our schools and universities. Very few other small states have such a plethora of world-class higher education departments, and we can only hope that the end point of the Brexit process does not dislocate them from common European funding mechanisms. That points to the fact that the common assumption that the strength of Scotland’s defence industry is mainly in the maritime sector may change in the future. These are encouraging developments, and I only hope that the potential development of cyber and electromagnetic capabilities in Scotland leads to much growth and diversification. Again, that was discussed at the Defence Committee this morning.

Let me draw my remarks to a close by reiterating my agreement with most of what was said by other Members, who spoke about the abilities of those who work in the defence sector in Scotland. We are grateful for the contribution they have made and will continue to make to the health of our economy and to our neighbours and allies. Let me reassure them that, as least from my perspective, independence continues to be the best way forward for a sustainable future away from the historical underinvestment by successive UK Governments in defence in Scotland. Finally, we hear much about the 2% of GDP that the UK spends on defence, but Scotland does not get its fair share of that. Perhaps the Minister can tell us why not.

5.4 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) for bringing this important and timely debate to Westminster Hall.

We on the Scottish National party Benches really appreciate his timing; only last weekend, our party decided to develop a policy of setting in stone a road map for future force in places such as Scotland, and how we can have conventional forces in places such as Scotland, and how we can have conventional forces in such as Rosyth in my constituency and on the Clyde. We have long made the case that the fleet auxiliary ships should be built in Scotland, and that the north Atlantic and the High North should be the bread-and-butter areas of activity for our Navy and Air Force, yet not a single ship of any significant size is based north of the English channel, and the people of Scotland feel exposed to potential threats from the north and the east. In the air, following the demise of Nimrod, we beg and borrow any maritime aircraft we can find from the USA, Canada and Norway until the new P-8s come into service in 2021.

We would like more support for our defence industries, not just to meet the defence needs of today but to help them create the new technologies that will be at the cutting edge of our future defence posture. If we put more money and time into the technology, jobs and skills we have, perhaps we will find better solutions that we can apply as a society.

I was really taken by some of the ideas I picked up on a NATO visit to Nova Scotia earlier this year. The Canadian Space Agency is a leader in technology, and its use of satellites and different information-gathering devices would sit exceptionally well with the scientific reputation of Scotland’s space industry. Canada organised a huge competition to identify the country’s first astronaut, which involved kids in schools, with the aim of boosting their science, technology, engineering and maths activity, and allowing more children to become involved in science and technology. All the provinces involved got behind their local candidate to be the first Canadian astronaut, and that really upped the ante with respect to people’s interest in science and technology. Canada even put a picture of its first astronaut on its $20 bill; every time someone spends one, they are reminded that their country is associated with science and innovation. It is quite amazing what you can do when you have your own currency.

I thought I was going to get an intervention there. Here in the UK, we are going to lose out on £1.2 billion of investment through the Galileo programme as we drop out of the EU. That cannot be good news for anyone. That is the kind of investment we need to take us forward, to enable us to use the skillsets of our graduates and to support our defence industries to diversify into more peaceable activity.

The other area I would like to talk about is cyber-security. There was recently a meeting of cyber-experts at Edinburgh Napier University. Small nations, such as Estonia, have shown the way forward, as they have picked up prizes and accolades for the expertise and innovation they have shown in finding solutions to security problems. Again, leaving the EU puts us in quite a difficult—and weaker—position. Money must be found to retain that research and development to encourage new cyber-products and services to come to market.

I have come hot foot from a meeting in Committee Room 6 at which we were talking about the costs associated with nuclear submarines. I have no doubt that we could use the range of skills and talents involved in building submarines, maintaining the warheads, and so on, to provide us with a better chance of developing economic activity rather than spending it on a weapons system that will never be used.

Stephen Kerr: The reality is that the nuclear deterrent is used every single moment of every single day. It is a deterrent—that is how it works, and it is working really well because we have had peace for a very long time.
Mr Sweeney: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. As we are discussing the defence industry in Scotland, we must express the Opposition’s frustration that no one from the Scotland Office is present to answer for the Government. That crystallises the Opposition’s belief that the Secretary of State for Scotland is not providing the political backing that Scotland needs. I cast no aspersions on the resilient efforts of the Minister, with whom I often enjoy battling back and forth across the Dispatch Box, but it is a pity that the Secretary of State for Scotland could not be here. I will discuss that later in my contribution.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West outlined, the defence sector in Scotland takes many shapes and forms, from shipbuilding to the aerospace industry, with exceptional talents. Unfortunately, they are not being enabled to flourish as they should. There is a clear absence of an industrial strategy, and given the engineering expertise that can be found across the whole defence sector, it should be at the heart of any industrial strategy. The Government do not seem to appreciate that, and they will undermine the integrity of the defence sector in the near future if they do not rapidly get to grips with it.

If we take the obvious example of shipbuilding, which is easy for me as I worked in the industry, we see that the Government’s approach to the fleet solid support ships contract is nothing short of absurd. The decision not to factor the socioeconomic value of defence contracts into the procurement process is economically illiterate and flies in the face of common sense. The Minister and I have batted this back and forth, as I mentioned, and I am sure that in a few minutes he will tell me that it is all about value for money for the taxpayer. However, that argument falls apart because the contract’s socioeconomic value is not factored in at the procurement stage. The reported cost of the contract is £1 billion, but as studies such as those by the GMB union estimate, keeping the FSS ships in the UK, it would contribute to the nation’s prosperity. If we built FSS ships in the UK, it would contribute to the nation’s prosperity. Just think of the difference those jobs could make to the UK economy and to communities across Scotland.

The GMB has estimated that the contract would return about £285 million to the Exchequer in the form of taxes, national insurance contributions, lower social security payments and so on. If we built FSS ships in the UK, it would contribute to the nation’s prosperity. In fact, there would be a direct tax and national insurance return to the Treasury of up to £415 million—20% of the contract cost, which represents a bargain.

Data from other countries indicates that naval shipbuilding has a multiplier effect of 1.35, with £1.35 generated in long-term economic benefits for every £1 spent. Therefore, the UK benefit from a programme cost of £1 billion would be £1.35 billion. Having those ships built overseas would simply hand the benefit to someone else—that is probably why they are so eager to bid. Perhaps we should take a leaf out of their book and, at the Government’s discretion, ensure that those ships are built in the United Kingdom without competition—or, at the very least, ensure that the UK consortium wins the contract. That would secure jobs for the future.

At Rosyth, there is a gap between the completion of HMS Prince of Wales later this year and the expected refit of HMS Queen Elizabeth in 2030. The contract for
the fleet solid support ships could ensure that the shipyard runs at smoother capacity during that timeframe. However, as I have said, the Government’s economic illiteracy could well prevent that from happening, leading to much greater inefficiency and costs down the line. I am sure the people of Fife will not let them get away with that. The Government are keen to celebrate the continuous at-sea deterrent, but I would much rather see continuous in-shipyard building across the country. We would far rather celebrate that.

That brings me to the fact that there is clearly no wider industrial strategy not only for the defence sector but for manufacturing as a whole. To use Fife as an example, the Government are refusing to keep the FSS contract in the UK. At the same time, not even 10 miles away, the BiFab yards in Burntisland are sitting there idle because of a lack of contracts. That is another example of the Government’s complete and utter short-sightedness.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Gentleman is over his time and the Minister must respond to the debate, so he needs to bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Sweeney:** I shall steer it into port forthwith, Mr Hollobone.

The Government have spent the past few months saying how wonderful it is that this offshore wind deal has been signed, but we are not seeing the benefits spin off. Other countries are clearly benefiting from that, through state aid deals. Many references have been made to opportunities in the space sector, but yet again the Government have not convinced us about what they are doing.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West again for securing the debate. I have shown what a Labour Government would do with a coherent strategy. I look forward to hearing the Minister address the key points raised, including the need for a more robust defence industrial strategy to maximise the economic opportunities.

5.19 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing the debate and for the tone of it. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is right that it has been a considered debate about how we might diversify the defence industry in Scotland.

Before I address some of the specific points that have been raised, I want to emphasise the importance of the UK’s defence industry, both in delivering world-class military capabilities to our armed forces and in contributing to the UK economy. Last year’s report into the contribution of defence to UK prosperity by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) said that Scotland wants its fair share, but as a Yorkshire MP I would say that £300 per head in Scotland compares very favourably with the £60 per head that we get in Yorkshire and the Humber. I think it is we who want our fair share.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** There is a difference between a nation and a region, clearly.

**Stuart Andrew:** There are many Yorkshire people who would argue very differently.

We invest in shipbuilding in Scotland to maintain world-class capabilities for our Royal Navy, recognising the incredible expertise of the Scottish shipbuilding sector. With a history that dates back more than 150 years, it has long been the envy of the world and today remains a global leader. As we have heard, in the past few years Scotland has played a major part in the building, assembly and successful delivery of HMS Queen Elizabeth, the most powerful surface vessel in British history. The MOD has also placed a £3.7 billion contract to build the first three state-of-the-art Type 26 global combat ships on the Clyde, where all eight will eventually built. The first of these City-class frigates has been named HMS Glasgow and the last will be HMS Edinburgh. Coupled with our order for five offshore patrol vessels, this work will sustain some 4,000 jobs in Scottish shipyards and throughout the supply chain until the 2030s. No other industry in the UK can boast such a pipeline of future work.

Many other businesses are investing in Scotland, and I have heard many people congratulate and praise them. They include Babcock, BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Leonardo, Thales, Raytheon and QinetiQ. Denchi Power is an innovative smaller company, based in the far northern coastal town of Thurso in Caithness, which from its factory overlooking the beautiful islands of Orkney provides much of the essential advanced battery and charging technology and subsystems for the UK’s combat radio systems. These companies demonstrate the diversity of size and geography of the Scottish defence supply chain.

In the air, Leonardo manufactures state-of-the-art radar systems in Edinburgh. I had the great privilege of seeing some of the fantastic work it is doing there, and it is world beating. We want to see more of that as part of the combat air strategy. At RAF Lossiemouth, work has commenced on a new £132 million strategic facility co-funded by the MOD and Boeing. Up to 200 local jobs will be created at the peak of construction and we expect over 400 new jobs in the operation, once the P-8A fleet is based there permanently.

On land, companies across Scotland have provided and continue to logistically support high-technology subsystems on the Army’s critical warfighting platforms. These include Challenger 2 main battle tanks, Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, Foxhound patrol vehicles and the new AJAX reconnaissance fleet. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) asked for an update, and I can tell him that there is an ongoing competition on package 2 between the two contenders, and we are waiting for their revised bids, which we

Last year, defence spend with industry in Scotland amounted to £1.65 billion, supporting some 10,000 jobs and equivalent to £300 per capita, which is above the UK average. The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) said that Scotland wants its fair share, but as a Yorkshire MP I would say that £300 per head in Scotland compares very favourably with the £60 per head that we get in Yorkshire and the Humber. I think it is we who want our fair share.
It is right that there is more that we can do, and I am absolutely determined that we do it. Scotland also benefits from the defence innovation initiative. The Defence and Security Accelerator finds and funds exploitable innovation to support UK defence and security quickly and effectively. It brings together the private sector, academia and Government organisations to find innovative solutions to some of the challenging problems facing defence. In the last year, DASA has launched 14 new themed competitions and run five cycles to open call. It has received nearly 800 proposals from over 480 organisations; some 228 proposals have been funded, of which over half are from small and medium-sized enterprises, with over £36 million of funding allocated. DASA’s competition events and outreach work are supported by a team of regionally focused innovation partners. This year DASA has been building relationships in Scotland and liaising with Scottish Enterprise, Textiles Scotland and the Universities of Glasgow, Strathclyde and St Andrews, to name but a few.

We also heard about space; Scotland has a great opportunity in that sector. Scotland is developing innovative defence technologies in that area, which is one reason that the Government’s flagship cyber-security event was hosted by the National Cyber Security Centre in Glasgow last week. Raytheon, which I met this morning and which specialises in the development of cyber-technologies, has recently announced new investment in a hi-tech manufacturing facility in Livingston, as we heard in the debate, as part of the diversification of its portfolio and its investment in British jobs. That is exciting news that will build on the support that it already gives.

More broadly, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West is right that space funding is an area that we need to develop carefully and take every possible opportunity from. That is why our space strategy, setting the direction for the defence space sector, will be published shortly. I regularly meet companies across the country, including many in Scotland, to talk about the space sector. I can assure hon. Members that it is something we are taking very seriously, because we know it will provide a great deal of opportunity in the future.

On 14 March this year the Defence Secretary reaffirmed his commitment to increasing defence’s contribution to UK economic growth, setting out a new package of measures to drive productivity and innovation in the sector. We held prosperity conferences and SME workshops, and we want to engage with as many people as possible. Many Members who have an interest in defence have arranged for me to meet businesses. I am happy to do that because we want to engage with as many of them as possible, so that we can take advantage of what they offer for the security of our nation, and so that every part, including Scotland, benefits from the wider prosperity that defence spending can bring.

Ged Killen: It is a pity that the Minister’s response was cut short, not least because I was on the edge of my seat waiting to hear what he had to say about the FSS issue that has been raised several times by Members in the debate.

As the Minister says, this has been a considered debate. I am not sure what progress we have made, but we have at least been able to give some of the issues an airing. I am pleased that the Minister acknowledges the need for more to be done and recognises the opportunities, particularly in the space sector. I thank hon. Members for their attendance and participation, and you, Mr Hollobone, for chairing the proceedings.

I passionately want shipbuilding to remain a mainstay of the defence industry in Scotland, but I want it to be one of many mainstays as we move towards a defence environment that is increasingly dominated by information gathering technologies and intangible assets. There is much for us to be proud of when it comes to Scotland’s defence industry, but if we are to future-proof it and realise its untapped potential, we need smart investment decisions, long-term thinking and a focused mission-oriented approach to diversifying it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered diversification of the defence industry in Scotland.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Mark Pawsey: I share the views of my hon. Friend in believing that districts are the right-sized and best-located authorities to deliver a substantial number of services to local residents. I fear that some of that connectivity and identity would be lost in a larger organisation.

I will now talk about some of the things that district councils have been able to do. One key issue that came out of our report is that district councils have a proven track record of devising innovative solutions to transform public services by taking a lead in improving services and providing outcomes for people through better collaboration. That is a really important point, which we will come back to again and again. It is driven by a financial imperative in some instances, but in many ways it is driven by the desire to do things better.

District councils have a proven track record in building better lives and bigger economies in the areas they serve. Through their roles in planning and housing, they act as the building blocks for local economic growth, and in many ways districts work collaboratively with each other and alongside newly established local enterprise partnerships to deliver growth and support local businesses and industry. I believe that district councils also protect and enhance the quality of life by safeguarding our environment, which is an issue we will be considering later today in the Chamber. Promoting public health, leisure and a sound environment is an important role, creating attractive places to live and where people will want to raise their families and build an economy.

Districts are also tasked with the challenge of tackling homelessness—again, their proximity to the people and knowledge of individuals is important—and the duty to promote wellbeing.

For district councils to deliver for their residents and the businesses in their area, it is important to ensure that they have sustainable and suitable levels of funding, which is the matter I want to address. It is why the all-party parliamentary group for district councils, which I chair, held a formal Select Committee-type inquiry on the finances of district councils. We published our report, “Delivering the District Difference,” in July 2018. I want to put on the record my gratitude to the 60 local authorities that provided written evidence to the APPG, and I thank the seven district councils, including Rugby Borough Council, that came before us and provided oral evidence to the APPG in Parliament. I am also grateful to many parliamentary colleagues who sat on that committee, particularly the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr. Drew), who took part in the evidence sessions and is here today.

Our report was a major piece of work, and we collaborated with the District Councils’ Network to ensure that we were working closely with the sector. I thank the
DCN for its valuable contribution to the report. In our evidence sessions, it came across loud and clear that district councils under financial pressures have identified innovative and efficient ways of doing things differently to provide better value for money to local taxpayers. A recent Local Government Association report found that district councils have saved £224 million through sharing services with other districts and bodies, which is far more than any other type of council.

I will give some examples of shared working arrangements that my local authority, Rugby Borough Council, has with others. Rugby has a shared service on building control with Warwick District Council and works on procurement with our neighbours, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council. A particularly useful case study in Rugby involves its working closely with Daventry District Council to provide local crematorium and cemetery services. On its own, neither authority was of a sufficient size to be able to deliver these services efficiently, and my constituents wishing to use crematorium services were obliged to make lengthy journeys to either Coventry or the other side of Warwick. There had been an aspiration for such a service in Rugby for some time, but it was recognised that, in isolation, Rugby was not of sufficient size to deliver it. By working with Daventry and providing a facility on the border between the two authorities, we have ensured that the residents of both local authorities have great provision.

National Audit Office figures show that district councils have experienced the most significant real-terms cut in spending power between 2016-17 and 2019-20, which has required them to be enterprising. One of Rugby’s overarching corporate priorities is to become financially self-sufficient by 2020. It is seeking to reduce its reliance on the sometimes arbitrary and variable central Government funding sources and take control of its sources of income through local taxation arising from economic growth and investment income. When I was a councillor, I was always aware of concerns that the pots of funding might or might not be available. They were sometimes arbitrary or time-limited, which meant that it was difficult to plan for the long term. Rugby aims to be financially self-sufficient so that it is no longer reliant on those variable sources. That will ensure better provision for my constituents in the long term.

All councils have had to work hard to achieve more with less. Between 2010 and 2020, councils in England will have lost almost 60p of every pound of central Government funding. For district councils, that equates to almost £1 billion. I know the Minister recognises the role that districts have played in identifying savings, and is aware of the burden that they have shouldered in recent years.

Alberto Costa: I thank my hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way again. The district councils in my constituency have highlighted the ever-increasing cost of waste and recycling services. Proposals to scrap a charge on green waste collection and introduce weekly food waste collections, although laudable, are likely to put significant financial burdens on district councils. Does my hon. Friend agree that, should district councils implement those changes, proper and full support is needed from central Government?

Mark Pawsey: There is a role for central Government, but those are local, devolved matters for district councils. One of the good things about district councils is that, because they are close to their residents, they know and understand what is best for them. My hon. Friend draws attention to the important role that district councils play in environmental matters, which are of real concern to residents.

In recent years, districts have been given more freedoms and powers to stimulate their local economies. In our report, we urge the Government to commit to retain current incentives to help district councils deliver the homes that the country needs. We are keen to see the retention of the new homes bonus. My local authority in Rugby has a very progressive attitude to new house building and is doing well from the new homes bonus, which enables local residents to support the principle that it has adopted.

During our inquiry, the all-party group heard evidence about the savings and efficiencies that can be made in social care by increasing district councils’ capacity to deliver preventive services. Mannie Ketley, the head of service and chief financial officer at Rugby borough council, told us:

“What the districts have shown, working in conjunction with the county council, is that a very much joined up approach has been of huge benefit, so I am confident that as groups of authorities come together, districts are well placed to support in the delivery of social care...Something for districts to consider, or certainly for government to consider, is our role from a prevention perspective and the ability to allow district councils to levy a prevention precept much like upper tier authorities are able to levy that social care precept. There is a huge amount of recognition of the role district councils play at the prevention end of the spectrum”.

They do that through, for example, the provision of recreation facilities that enable people to get out into the open and enjoy the countryside.

The evidence and insights that the all-party group received led us to make seven key recommendations. We identified measures, flexibilities and incentives to stimulate local growth. I want to put them on the record and share them with parliamentary colleagues. The first and most important is that no district council should find itself in the position of negative revenue support grant. That would mean that councils hand over to the Government a proportion of the tax that they raise locally, which would be a real disincentive to grow the local economy. I will come to the way in which our proposals have been addressed.

We argued that the fair funding review should reverse the decline in district council spending power. We suggested that districts should be allowed the freedom to introduce more incentives. We said that measures to increase district spending power should include greater flexibility to raise revenue and introduce incentives to support local growth.

I have already referred to the new homes bonus. We argued that the baseline should be removed, and that there should be a long-term commitment to the new homes bonus. In fact, we went further and said that district councils should be given more financial incentives to deliver more homes. The time available to local authorities to spend right-to-buy receipts should be extended, and districts should be allowed to retain 100% of those receipts.
We spoke about our concern about the lifting of the borrowing cap—I will come to how the issues have already been dealt with by enabling district councils to spend the entirety of their funding. We drew attention, as Mannie Ketley did, to the role that districts play in prevention as housing and planning authorities. They provide leisure and recreational facilities, install home adaptations, tackle homelessness, offer debt advice and deliver social prescription. We also spoke about the need to establish a health prevention fund to support projects that deliver preventive services, which would in turn reduce the financial burden on adult social care.

I am delighted that the Government allocated extra funding in the 2018 Budget and the 2019-20 local government finance settlement, and that two of our recommendations have already been acted on. Just a week after we published our report, the Government announced that they would cancel the negative rate support grant for 2019-20, recognising the disincentive effect. The removal of negative RSG has meant an average saving of more than £350,000 for every district council that would otherwise have faced negative RSG, and more than £50 million overall.

On our recommendation that there should be no further changes to the new homes bonus and that the baseline should be removed, the pot of £18 million is welcome. For my local authority, Rugby Borough Council, no change to the existing threshold means that it would not receive any new homes bonus funding for the first 150 homes delivered each year. The Government have also announced the lifting of the housing borrowing cap, which will be a very significant and helpful move for districts, and more money has been made available through the rural services delivery grant.

The all-party group is delighted that the Government have responded and listened to the voice of districts. We are grateful for that response of recognising the need for change and listening to the voice of districts. At the conclusion of the debate, I hope that the Minister will update the House about the other recommendations that our all-party group made, in particular our call for greater freedom to deliver preventive health services. It is important to invest in such services for the broader welfare of our citizens. I will also be grateful if he outlines what consideration he is giving to the introduction of further freedoms and incentives for districts to grow their local economies.

As the Government look at the technical detail behind the future funding formula and business rates retention, I hope that the Minister will provide some reassurance that districts will continue to receive their fair share of funding. For many local authorities, there is a lack of clarity, and further rates reductions for some will mean a less reliable basis on which to plan budgets appropriately. All organisations, whether in the private or the public sector, benefit from a longer-term perspective, but the funding available from April 2020 remains unclear, as is how it will be distributed and the means of delivery. It is vital for the 2019 spending review to provide the right level of funding for local government, enabling councils to perform their role. Rugby Borough Council, for example, tells me that it faces several risks from the forthcoming funding reform and has concerns about whether it can continue to deliver the high level of services it provides.

The recommendations in our report have many positive aspects across all districts. I am delighted that the Government have already adopted many of them, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister what steps the Government will take in respect of the other recommendations we made.

9.52 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), on such an excellent expose of the funding of district councils. I am delighted to be part of the group and to have played a small part in an excellent report. I look forward to engaging with the Minister again, and with my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), so that we can at least bring attention to bear on this important topic.

In advance of the debate, I asked my district council in Stroud what main aspects it would like the Minister to look at. I pay due regard to the council leader, Doina Cornell, and the head of finance, Andrew Cummings; both contributed to an outline of what they saw as the main funding formula issues. It would be pointless to go over the same ground as the hon. Member for Rugby, but I will reinforce what he said, which was borne out by the Local Government Association and the District Councils’ Network, both of which made excellent reports to allow us to make our contributions today.

Stroud would like the Minister to dwell on four main points. I have a couple of subsidiary ones, which I will talk about at the end. First—overwhelmingly so—is the issue of uncertainty in the sector. Local government in general faces uncertainty about the future funding regime; the forthcoming spending review will obviously have an impact on the finances of the sector from 2020-21, but we are also not sure about the new fair funding review, the changes to the new homes bonus and the resetting of the business rates baselines—they will all come together. They could be good news, but they could put local government under even more pressure.

My district was in a sense saved by the Government’s decision not to pursue the negative revenue support grant. We are one of the areas of the country in the business rates retention pilot scheme, but that is coming to an end and I am interested to know the Government’s future thinking. That all adds to the mood of uncertainty, however, and such a background makes it difficult for local authorities to set budgets. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton will have things to say about that.

On resetting the business rates baselines, the Government have made it clear that that is the direction of travel in which they wish to go, but they have not quite said how they intend to get there. So much depends on how the moneys already there are redistributed, and that will have an impact on district councils because we tend to be at the end of the train, rather than driving it—some of us might hope for a much greater say in how things are going.

That level of uncertainty is multiplied by the potential changes to the new homes bonus system. In Stroud district, that contributes £1.8 million, which is a not inconsiderable sum, and one that is important in allowing us to balance our budget. Again, will the Government say what they intend to do? We are talking about what
District Council Finances

[Dr David Drew]

the changes will imply after this year. If some of the suggestions are implemented, sadly many authorities including mine stand to lose out very badly.

Another big bugbear is the limited ability of small district councils to raise money through council tax. District councils are limited to a 3% ceiling, whereas upper-tier authorities have been granted some dispensation with the social care precept. The police have also been allowed to raise a much greater sum. I am a great fan of parish and town councils, and one of the reasons I am a fan is that they set their own budgets; they take the responsibility and are not capped.

The result—I do not know whether this is the case in Rugby as it is in Stroud—has been some offloading of responsibilities on to parish and town councils. That might be laudable, because the idea of subsidiarity and running things as locally as possible has merit, but the problem is that parish and town councils might be running things because they have to, because the district councils simply do not have the resources—although that gets us to pay attention to the difficult scenario of the threat of closure of such services. The District Councils’ Network is therefore clearly lobbying for what is called a prevention precept—the hon. Member for Rugby intimated that—and it will be interesting to know the Government’s attitude to that.

On housing, quickly—I am mainly looking at the funding per se of the councils—there are problems. Stroud District Council owns its own stock; it bought it for some £97 million. We are proud that we have built something in the order of 230 new council houses, which is a considerable increase for a small district authority. We could have the argument about the right to buy, which some of us feel is a real disincentive, but the problem is that although notionally the Government have said that the cap on borrowing has been removed, real hurdles remain in the way of driving forward that programme. At the moment, therefore, we are at a standstill, which is really disappointing, because it would be the way to deal with at least some of our problems of homelessness and of other means by which people get into the housing sector. I hope that the Government will look at what is happening, and why there is not the drive towards what some of us want to see, which is council housing at least being part of the solution, rather than being seen as a marginal element.

I have a couple of final points to make. Planning is always a real bugbear, because we are forever expected to provide more housing, which is right, and more jobs, which is right. The problem is that there are not necessarily the means to do that. The Government’s formula means that Stroud is being asked to provide something like an extra 48% on top of its normal provision, and the question of how that will be done is causing real heartache in communities. There are very few ways in which the provision of services can be guaranteed if the housing is provided, so the Government need to look at their planning proposals. That is all bound up, because it affects the new homes bonus, which is the incentive, but if the funding is not carried through, there is very little benefit for local authorities and the people they represent.

Waste is a difficult issue. Stroud District Council has a proud record of collection. It is one of the greenest authorities in the country and has a good record for collecting food waste. I will not go into the politics of this, but we have a new incinerator about to go live and the county is starting to remove tax credits for recycling. That is totally bizarre, because we talk about the need to drive up recycling and to avoid waste. I could go on at great length about that; I have said many things in the past about it and no doubt will in future. Would the Minister look at some of the ways in which the smaller district local authorities are penalised by what I see as a mad dash towards incineration?

I share the desire of the hon. Member for Rugby to get this topic heard. It is a pity that a few more people are not in the debate. We are a bit of an endangered species because so many authorities are going unitary. I was talking to the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) about that, because in Bedfordshire they are in the process of doing that. I support unitary—the Minister responded to my debate on unitary—but until Gloucestershire grasps the nettle, we have to do the best we can for our district. Many people look to that authority for the bulk of their services.

I hope the Minister listens to the need for certainty and proper funding, and that he recognises that those authorities are doing valuable work on waste and new housing, and more particularly on the services that are so important to everyday life.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing this debate, although its importance is not reflected in the number of speakers. Nevertheless, that does not mean that the work done by district councillors across England is not critical and life changing to millions of people. I place on the record my thanks to our councillors of every colour, and I wish every candidate success, in different degrees, in tomorrow’s local elections.

The vibrancy of local democracy is what communities are all about. Most of us have come into politics through local government, because we are passionate about the places we live in and the power of positive politics to make a difference. District councils reflect that in a special and unique way because of how grounded they are in the local population. They are important also because they are the primary deliverer of neighbourhood services. I think about what makes an area somewhere decent to live; it is those neighbourhood services that make life worth living—an decent park, good quality countryside, clean and safe environments, and access to cultural facilities such as libraries. They all make up the fabric of our local communities.

There are tensions between districts and councils, but generally they work well together and, between them, provide good quality services for our communities. Like every council in England, they are under huge financial pressure. It is a bit simplistic to look at a spreadsheet, which we do whenever there is a local government finance debate, and to dismiss the cash cuts to district councils as being quite small. Their budgets, however, are much smaller. The percentage loss, particularly across critical neighbourhood services, has been profound in many district council areas. Rugby has experienced a
real-terms cut of 47% to cultural services for recreational sport, open spaces and tourism. People feel the impact of austerity even at a district level.

That brings me to the fair funding review. We can all argue about how we have ended up here—we do that on a regular basis. The challenge, which is similar to that for adult social care and children’s services, is that most of the issues should not be party political. They are not political—they are about the delivery of public services in local communities. Regardless of the places we represent and live, we all want good quality public services to be available to everyone.

Political parties need to unite on some of the issues—local government does that anyway—and find long-term, sustainable solutions to how we fund local public services. We have a fair funding review today, but who knows when a general election will be called? A change of national Government matters almost more to local councils than to any other part of government, central or local, because it has a direct implication for how they are financed.

Every Government have always moved money around to favour the areas where they have strong representation. When there was a Labour Government, my locality had enough money to fund public services. It was never quite enough because we always wanted to go further and do more, particularly on housing and the local economy. Then, we had a change of Government and there was a shift. There is a good chance that when the cycle comes back around, the reverse will happen. That is not the way to fund sustainable public services. It does not give credit to our public servants who work for local authorities and it is not fair on the local councillors who have to deal with that cycle of spending turmoil. It is not right for the taxpayer, either.

On cross-party consensus, the Local Government Association—I declare an interest as a vice-president—carried out an independent review of local government funding a number of years ago. It looked at the then current state and at what type of future structure could provide sustainability and value for taxpayer money. We need to look at some of those ideas.

Mark Pawsey: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman, who seems to be making a pretty strong case for local authorities becoming self-sufficient. Is that what he is arguing?

Jim McMahon: I understand the calls for that, but I stop short of it, or anywhere near it, because the ability to fund local government public services is so heavily dependent on property taxation, which causes huge geographical inequalities across the country. We want a funding formula and structure where funding follows need. If we give local authorities financial independence there will be significant winners but also significant losers. My strong view is that council tax places a disproportionate burden on local taxpayers in terms of overall taxation. It has been expected to fund too many local public services while the central Government grant is being reduced. Business rates are near breaking point. Those taxes serve a very important purpose, but they also have significant limitations.

Whether it is a district or unitary council, the connection between the tax people pay and the neighbourhood universal services they receive is very healthy for democracy and transparency in governance. I am not sure whether the same is true of social care and children’s services, which in general benefit a smaller number of the local population. Those services are targeted, not universal, and have no relationship to local property values in 1991 or the business rate base that has been built up over hundreds of years. At some point there will have to be a separation of the two, for a purer connection between the council tax that people pay locally and the neighbourhood universal services they receive in return. There should be a properly assessed fair funding formula to ensure that funding goes where older people need care, children need social services, and homes need to be built to resolve homelessness. If we were to do that, it would be a start.

The LGAs’ independent review also recommended that there ought to be an independent body to assess the total requirement across England. It would not, of course, set the Treasury’s Budget, but it would make recommendations to the Treasury about the total sum of local government needs for the requirements placed on it by central Government. If the recommended sum was £1, the Government might decide to provide 90p of funding and distribute that according to an independently assessed fair funding formula.

Another suggestion, which has huge merit, is that we should establish local public accounts committees. Our councillors see on a daily basis where money is spent in their areas by a range of Departments, in a way that almost no other elected representative does. That provides important insight into how money could be used to better effect. Establishing a local public accounts committee would effectively allow a local authority to hold the ring on all the public sector spending in its area—to ensure that there is no duplication, that any gaps are identified and filled, and that people can work more collaboratively for better public services. Our councillors have proved, and all the evidence shows, that they are best placed to deliver public sector efficiency. They are rooted in the community, they know how to deliver public services, and their insight would help the whole of Government.

To be honest, however, even after all that, there is still not enough money in the system. We know that there will be a funding gap of more than £3 billion by the coming financial year, and by 2024-25 that gap will have increased to £8 billion. The truth is that people are living longer and need care. We know that if we do not give them care in their homes, we will put pressure on the acute sector and the NHS. We also know that children need safeguarding. We can have good processes and screening in place, but ultimately we have to provide protection for young people. The threats are increasingly complex, particularly with the growth of online social media and so on, and councils need the capacity to deal with that. Many are struggling under the weight of those two pressures.

Will the Government meet us halfway and agree to take some of the politics out of local government spending, for the benefit of all of local government? Will they be radical in challenging the Treasury to cough up for once and provide the money that is needed to fund local public services? Will they show leadership and stop pitting council against council? This is not about urban areas and rural areas, or counties, shires and unitaries; this is about local people and local public services, and every man, woman and child in England deserves decent public services.
10.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing the debate and on his work in this place to champion the role of district councils, which he does with passion and eloquence. I have been in this job for just over a year; I have enjoyed all the work I have done with him, and district councils are lucky to have such a champion for their cause in this place. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), who deserves credit for his focus on the issues concerning district councils.

While I am on the subject, my good friend John Fuller, the president of the District Councils’ Network, is an irrepressible advocate and champion for district councils. I am sure the only reason there is slightly lower attendance at the debate than usual is that everyone is out campaigning hard in their local communities for the district council elections. I join the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) in wishing everyone well on Thursday.

We are here to discuss the “Delivering the District Difference” report, which was released some months ago. I was pleased to be able to attend its launch, and I pay tribute to everyone who contributed to the production of that fantastic document. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby pointed out, it highlights that district councils are at the heart of our communities and our system of local government. They cover two thirds of the country and deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services.

I am fortunate to come from a two-tier area, with fantastic district councils in Hambleton and Richmondshire. I have seen as I have travelled around the country visiting countless other districts that they deliver high-quality services, ensure excellent value for their local taxpayers and, as we heard from all the Members who contributed, remain incredibly close and connected to their communities. We should be very grateful for that.

I am pleased to say that this Government are determined to continue supporting district councils. We heard about the seven points in the report, but I thought I would frame my remarks by looking at the two things the District Councils’ Network highlights as the key roles of district councils: building stronger economies and providing better lives for their citizens. In discussing those two overarching roles, I hope to pick up at least the seven specific points in the report, as well as others that Members raised.

District councils are integral to the UK’s future prosperity. We talk a lot about the Budget, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is an important figure, but our prosperity as a nation will be built bottom-up, community by community, neighbourhood by neighbourhood and district by district. District councils have a vital role in driving economic growth in their areas—indeed, only that economic growth can pay for the vital public services that we all care so much about.

When talking about what we have done, business rates are a great place to start. The business rates retention scheme is yielding strong results; local authorities estimate that they will keep more than £2.5 billion in revenue from generating growth this year, on top of the core settlement funding we debate so much in this place. In the current year, there are 15 75% pilot pools, which were selected through a competitive bidding process. They cover 122 local authorities, 83 of which, crucially, are district councils. We heard from the hon. Member for Stroud about the importance to his area of being part of that pilot programme last year. We plan to deliver 75% retention to the entire country from next year. That will give districts even more control of the money they raise through their own economic success.

On a related theme, building stronger high streets is one of the great pressing issues of our time. This Government understand that a thriving high street is at the centre of any local community’s vibrancy and success, and it is a mark of our confidence in district councils that we have trusted districts to lead the way. We announced a £675 million high streets transformation fund in the last Budget, and, as we are seeing, districts will take the lead in applying for those funds. The changes we are making to our planning system are pivotal to giving districts the power they need to shape their local high streets and areas. District councils are also at the heart of the Government’s ambition to achieve nationwide full-fibre broadband coverage by 2033. The revised national planning policy framework requires priority to be given to full-fibre connections in existing and new developments.

While I am on the topic of growth, I want to pay tribute to the innovative work across local government to drive up efficiency and creativity. We have seen the merging of district councils in East Suffolk, West Suffolk, and Somerset West and Taunton, as district councils seize the opportunity to improve services and drive efficiencies for their communities. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby about the creative shared working agreements that his local council has entered into, striving at every turn to provide better value for money for its residents by improving service delivery. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), who is no longer in his place, about the fantastic work by Harborough District Council and the efficiency it has created with its neighbour, Blaby District Council, to ensure that its taxpayers benefit from low council tax bills and high-quality public services.

Districts are well placed to innovate in that way. Given their smaller size, they can be agile and quick to respond. I see them as the entrepreneurial arm of local government, as was demonstrated in the recently announced £7.5 million local digital fund, which I was pleased to initiate and launch. Two of the successful bids for the first round of funding included a host of district councils, which will use that funding to explore ways they can use cutting-edge artificial intelligence technology and better data management in their authorities. I have repeatedly highlighted the social prescribing model of Adur and Worthing Councils as one that others should look to follow. They have been consistently at the cutting edge in driving digital transformation in local government.

Economic growth is not everything we should be focused on. As the District Councils’ Network has mentioned, creating better lives for our residents is equally important. Indeed, district councils are at the heart of helping the most vulnerable in our society to live those better lives.
We saw in the report and heard in the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby much about the important role that district councils play in prevention. Although clearly we are not fully there yet, we have seen Government responding to that need and recognising the important role that districts can play. For example, the disabled facilities grant is part of the Government’s commitment to help older and disabled people to live more independently. We established the grant to help local authorities to fund home adaptations, keeping people in their homes. The grant has more than doubled to over £500 million this financial year. Indeed, Rugby District Council has been allocated more than £2 million since 2015. Hopefully that represents a positive step in the direction of recognising the role that districts can play in prevention. If not fully the way to a precept, it is certainly a step in the right direction.

My hon. Friend also touched on homelessness and rightly highlighted that districts are on the frontline of reducing homelessness. Following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, between April and June last year more than 10,000 households secured their existing accommodation or were helped to find alternative accommodation through the new prevention and relief duties. Local authorities received an additional £72 million to carry out the new duties and are leading policy implementation through their role on the homelessness advice and support team.

We heard from the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton about the importance of parks, and I fully agree. Parks create communities that we want to live in, and make people proud of the area that they call home. They are the green lungs of our society.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): One thing that district councils do is planning, ensuring that we have an ordered and adequate amount of housing land available and so on. Is it not also important that there should be adequate funding for enforcement? In my area we have the two excellent district councils, North Hertfordshire and East Herts, but East Herts is having to spend a lot of money tackling cases of intentional disrepair. Local authorities are considering greater powers for the police and other bodies to enforce in the first place. I hope my right hon. Friend agree that adequate funding needs to be allowed in all settlements for such enforcement?

Rishi Sunak: Funding for all green spaces and such services is not ring-fenced by central Government. It would not be right for me, sitting in Whitehall as a Minister, to dictate to every single local authority how it should prioritise its resources between social care, homelessness, parks and planning enforcement. Every area will have different priorities, and it is right that local authorities make those decisions. The Government recently unveiled a range of initiatives around parks—not just the pocket parks programme but an additional several million pounds of funding for the renovation and upkeep of parks or children’s playgrounds that have fallen into disrepair. We have established the Parks Action Group to bring people from the industry together, and we funded the Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Trust with money for their accelerator to innovate new parks models. Indeed, we are also developing a new apprenticeship standard for 21st-century parks managers. On parks and green spaces the Government are firmly on the front foot, supporting local areas to ensure that their green spaces are there for their communities.

To the hon. Gentleman’s broader point, I would be the first to acknowledge that all local authorities, whether district, upper tier or unitary, have faced difficult times over the past years. They deserve enormous tribute for the fantastic job they have done in ensuring high-quality public services and public satisfaction in what they are doing at a time of constrained finances. That is thanks to their innovation and creativity, as was put so well by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby. We all know why we were in that situation: when the Government came into office in 2010, we were left with a £100 billion deficit, and savings had to be made across government. Again, I pay tribute to those in local government for playing a starring role in helping to bring our public finances back to a sustainable position.

Housing was mentioned by many speakers. Building the homes that our communities need is another great challenge of our time, and the Government have placed trust in districts to help solve it. One key recommendation in the report was the removal of the housing revenue account borrowing cap. That was the No. 1 request from districts, and I am pleased that the Government have responded to that, which has unleashed the potential for districts to get on and build the homes we need. Similarly, the Government listened to district council calls for continuity and stability on the new homes
bonus and responded by committing an additional £20 million to maintain the baseline this year, ensuring that district councils will receive more than £300 million in new homes bonus payments in 2019-20. Through all these measures, we are making every effort to create a housing market that works for everyone, and in doing so creating a country that works for everyone.

The hon. Member for Stroud mentioned uncertainty, and I acknowledge that issue. We are at the end of a spending review period, so naturally there will be some uncertainty as one set of programmes comes to an end and we wait for the spending review for certainty about what will replace them. The Government recognise the role that incentivising districts and authorities more generally to build houses has played in helping to get the number of new homes up to its highest in more than a decade. There were more than 220,000 last year, and I am sure that at this moment my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing is considering how best we can continue to incentivise local authorities in the new spending review.

I am always committed to providing certainty as early as possible for councils of all stripes so that they can make the long-term plans that we have heard are so important.

It is worth dwelling for a minute on housing. I visited the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby to see the fantastic work of his local council, replacing old high-rise blocks and improving the stock of houses for social rent. As my hon. Friend said, the council deserves credit for being on the front foot, forward thinking and keen to get on and provide the homes that our young people, and indeed all our communities, need.

I thank my hon. Friend for calling the debate on this vital issue. On my list of seven things, the one I have not touched on is freedom and flexibility. Perhaps this goes to the heart of the tension between the Government and the Opposition on how much to trust local government to get on with it. I am firmly and instinctively a localist. I want to be able to give and devolve powers down to the lowest possible level. It is good for our democracy and for our civic society if decisions are taken closer to the people they affect. I will be arguing where I can during the spending review process for greater freedoms and flexibilities for all local authorities. Indeed, at every meeting and engagement I go to, I ask local councillors, whether they are from parish or town councils all the way up to big metropolitan councils, for the ideas they have that I can debate, kick around with the team and put into the mix when we come to the spending review.

Jim McMahon rose—

Sir Oliver Heald rose—

Rishi Sunak: I will first take an intervention from the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton.

Jim McMahon: It is part of the nature of this place that we can be mischievous at times, but let us not be under any illusion: this tension is not caused by trust in local government. We all respect the role that councillors play and we trust them to know what is best for their area. Fundamentally, this is about the sustainability of local council finance and the historical local tax bases that inform an entirely devolved financial model. That is the only tension—this is not about trust; it is about financial sustainability.

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I will now take an intervention from my right hon. and learned Friend.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does the Minister agree that freedom and flexibility, particularly in housing, can provide settings for housing estates that fit the local area? Hertfordshire has a lot of garden conurbations—Welwyn garden city, Letchworth garden city, and so on—and we try to create settings for future buildings that include those garden features where possible. Other parts of the country also do their thing well, and over the past 30 years, housing settings—particularly public housing, but also more generally—have improved hugely, and that is down to the offices of district councils.

Rishi Sunak: I firmly agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. Planning and housing can be contentious in local areas, but one way to relieve that tension is to ensure that local communities feel that they are shaping the developments taking place around them. I saw that when I visited my right hon. and learned Friend’s constituency, and his point is well made.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton asked the Government to be radical. They have been radical by introducing neighbourhood planning. They have devolved planning power to local communities, often at parish or town level, so that that community can create its own neighbourhood plan, supported financially by incentive payments over the last few years. That plan is then given significant and strong legal weight in the planning process, which puts local communities, at a small level, in control of their destinies on the ground. That is central Government sitting here in Whitehall, being radical, and trusting and empowering local communities to construct the housing that they need and think appropriate for their areas.

I can debate this issue with the hon. Gentleman, but we must recognise that there are two sides to this coin. If one argues for more freedom, flexibility and trust in local government, one must also believe that local governments are able to shape their own destinies. It is no good saying that local governments are not able to sustain themselves and require constant handouts from central Government, yet also saying that they should be empowered to do everything they want. If central Government are shovelling money around the system, national politicians will always rightly be in charge of that system of redistribution. The more that money is raised locally, the more that local government will have the right to say, “Let us do things the way we want. You do not have the right to dictate to us what we do because you do not provide us with our funds.” There will of course be differences in the abilities of different areas to raise funds, and there will always be some element of redistribution, but local areas cannot be considered completely static entities with no ability to be creative, dynamic and improve their financial sustainability.

Jim McMahon: If the Minister is arguing in favour of growing the local tax base, we are entirely in agreement. If local authorities can demonstrate that through their
actions they have grown the local economy, and therefore the local tax base, we should discuss how they benefit from that success. That is not the same, however, as the historical inherited tax base that many local authorities rely on for their funding, which includes the housing stock and business rate base. We need to separate out the two things. We need fair funding to ensure that public services are properly and sustainably funded, and a proper incentive for local authorities to grow the local economy and tax base.

**Rishi Sunak:** I am pleased to say that that is exactly what the Government are doing. The fair funding review is a blank sheet of paper on which we can consider the relative needs of local areas. It is bottom up, and driven analytically and empirically by the evidence, so that we figure out the right element of need for each local area, and then add a system of redistribution to ensure that funding gets to the right place. I am pleased the hon. Gentleman supports the incentive mechanism. An argument I hear a lot—I think I have also heard it from him, so I am glad if I misheard it previously—is when councils say that they have no ability to grow and will therefore need more handouts. I would take issue with that. Yes, the starting bases may be different, but that does not mean that areas cannot look creatively and entrepreneurially at how to create growth and generate resources for their local community. I believe in growth and driving prosperity locally, because I think that is the only sustainable way to pay for public services. Whether money comes from national or local government, it will come only if the economy is growing and generating tax revenue, and that is why I am keen to focus the conversation on driving economic growth.

This has been an excellent debate, and I was glad to hear all the contributions on the importance of district councils. Funding is important, and the big point is the elimination of the negative revenue support grant—I am not entirely sure that the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton supported that when we unveiled it in the local government finance process. That is worth almost £153 million to the local government sector. District councils were big beneficiaries of the Government ensuring their commitment that the business rates baseline would not change over that period. I am glad that the Government were able to meet that big ask, which benefited 140 shire districts.

We all agree about the vital role of our district councils, their connection with communities and proximity to those affected by their decisions, and the importance of those decisions in ensuring that communities enjoy stronger local economies and better lives. It is my pleasure to represent district councils for the Government. I pay tribute to everything they do, and will continue to champion them for as long as I have this role.

10.36 am

**Mark Pawsey:** The debate has focused mostly on finance and funding, but it has been a valuable opportunity to consider the important role that district councils play in communities, and the important functions that they deliver. I am grateful to colleagues who spoke about the roles of their district councils and some of that innovative work, and to the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) for his reference to the neighbourhood services that district councils provide. It seems that there is a benefit to the delay between asking for a debate and securing it, because it gave the Government time to respond to many of the issues raised, and I am pleased they have taken those points on board.

I was interested in the Minister’s emphasis on stronger economies and the role of district councils in building those economies and developing high streets. I am also delighted that he took on board the bit about better lives. This is not always about finance and pounds and pence; it is about lifestyles and the benefits that councils can bring to the lives of individual residents. I am grateful to the Minister for his remarks, and for the opportunity, once again, to highlight the important role played by district councils.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered district council finances.

10.38 pm

*Sitting suspended.*


England Coastal Path

11 am

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the effect on landowners of the proposed England Coastal Path.

May I say how nice it is to see you in the Chair, Mr Gapes? I applied for this debate following representations from a number of small landowners in my constituency who face having part of their land expropriated by a Government agency, without compensation and against all their objections. That agency is Natural England, and the land being expropriated is being used as part of the England coastal path, which seeks to ensure that the public have access to England’s beautiful coastline.

While in some quarters that might be seen as a commendable and worthwhile aim, it is worth pointing out straight away that the justification for the original legislation for the coastal path was seriously flawed, because 70% of the coastline was already publicly accessible and an additional 14% was owned by the Government or large industries, with only 16% being in the control of private landowners. In addition, significant areas of that 16% were sites of special scientific interest and so could not be used.

The whole project is several years behind schedule and has put an additional strain on an already stretched public purse. Even if the scheme was good value for money, which is arguable, I believe it is simply wrong to route the path, without consent, through land that has been lawfully owned, kept and maintained by small family farmers and businesses, often for many generations.

Worse still, parts of the proposed route will put at risk not only the safety of grazing animals, but some of the people who will be using the path. The people who have contacted me are not major landowners with the people who will be using the path. The people who risk not only the safety of grazing animals, but some of family farmers and businesses, often for many generations. The property cannot be fenced off to protect livestock, and the owners have been given no clarity on issues such as liability, should people using the path injure, or be injured by, livestock.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for introducing this timely debate. Is he aware that I promoted a private Member’s Bill, the Coastal Path (Definition) Bill, the main purpose of which was to omit section 301 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, which deals with river estuaries? In my constituency, the proposal is that the path should go right up into Christchurch and across the River Stour, rather than across from Mudeford to Hengistbury Head, which would be a much more direct coastal route.

Gordon Henderson: I must be honest and say that I was not aware of my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill, but since he promotes more private Member’s Bills than all other hon. Members put together, it is hardly surprising that I would not remember that particular one. However, I am delighted to hear that it is not just my constituency that has concerns about the legislation.

Part of the north of Sheppey is given over to farming and holiday-related businesses. One of the families affected by the proposed route is that of Clive, Maria and Gary Phipps, who live on Connets Farm. To survive financially, they have had to diversify into other activities, including fencing contracting, holiday lets, a farm and forest school and wild camping.

The latter activity, which allows campers to use any suitable land on which to pitch their tents, was last year judged a winner by the camping organisation Pitchup.com, with a review score of 9.8 out of 10 for clifftop camping. The biggest appeal for those campers is that they have exclusive use of the land and the peace and quiet it provides. For a few days they are able to experience a simple life, back to nature and away from such things as interlopers, public footpaths, uninvited visitors and dogs.

Hon. Members can imagine the anger felt by the Phipps family that, despite the land’s already being accessible to those paying campers, Natural England wants to include it on the coastal path. One of the problems that poses for the Phipps is that people using the path will be able not simply to walk along the clifftops, but to loiter, picnic, cycle, pitch a tent free of charge and even have a barbecue. If that happens, the whole attraction of wild camping will be lost, which would be a major blow. As Clive Phipps told me:

“Having to accept a public footpath on our land will completely destroy any business we get from the camping facility and will, I’m sure, affect the viability of our holiday lets, because most of the people who come to stay with us, value the privacy and security offered by our little piece of England."

The irony is that one of the reasons why Natural England wants to run the path through Connets Farm is that the neighbouring holiday park owner refuses to allow access through his land. He is able to do so because the legislation protects holiday parks and, quite rightly, only allows the path to cut across a park with the owner’s consent. Unfortunately, small businesses such as that run by the Phipps family are not afforded the same protection, and that is simply unfair.

Other family-run farms and businesses sited along the north Sheppey coast are similarly being discriminated against. For instance, the path would run as close as 6 metres away from the house of one of those families. The property cannot be fenced off to protect livestock and the owners have been given no clarity on issues such as liability, should people using the path injure, or be injured by, livestock.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Is my hon. Friend saying that small landowners are facing a disproportionate burden that is not being acknowledged by the big industrial owners of some of the land, and that that is affecting their businesses?

Gordon Henderson: My hon. Friend is right. That is exactly what I am saying, and it goes further: Natural England is not showing any common sense but treating everybody the same, and that is simply not right.

To better explain the anger, I will set out some of the complaints that those landowners have relayed to me. I will begin by highlighting what is happening on the Isle of Sheppey, which lies adjacent to the Thames estuary and forms part of the Medway estuary. Parliament has made clear that the coastal path legislation is about access to the coast, not to estuaries, but Natural England is ignoring that guidance and pushing forward its plans for a path around the Isle of Sheppey, including along the island’s northern coastline.

To make a start, let me mention a farm in my constituency that has concerns about the legislation. One of the families affected by the proposed route is that of Clive, Maria and Gary Phipps, who live on Connets Farm. To survive financially, they have had to diversify into other activities, including fencing contracting, holiday lets, a farm and forest school and wild camping.

The latter activity, which allows campers to use any suitable land on which to pitch their tents, was last year judged a winner by the camping organisation Pitchup.com, with a review score of 9.8 out of 10 for clifftop camping. The biggest appeal for those campers is that they have exclusive use of the land and the peace and quiet it provides. For a few days they are able to experience a simple life, back to nature and away from such things as interlopers, public footpaths, uninvited visitors and dogs.

Hon. Members can imagine the anger felt by the Phipps family that, despite the land’s already being accessible to those paying campers, Natural England wants to include it on the coastal path. One of the problems that poses for the Phipps is that people using the path will be able not simply to walk along the clifftops, but to loiter, picnic, cycle, pitch a tent free of charge and even have a barbecue. If that happens, the whole attraction of wild camping will be lost, which would be a major blow. As Clive Phipps told me:

“Having to accept a public footpath on our land will completely destroy any business we get from the camping facility and will, I’m sure, affect the viability of our holiday lets, because most of the people who come to stay with us, value the privacy and security offered by our little piece of England."

The irony is that one of the reasons why Natural England wants to run the path through Connets Farm is that the neighbouring holiday park owner refuses to allow access through his land. He is able to do so because the legislation protects holiday parks and, quite rightly, only allows the path to cut across a park with the owner’s consent. Unfortunately, small businesses such as that run by the Phipps family are not afforded the same protection, and that is simply unfair.

Other family-run farms and businesses sited along the north Sheppey coast are similarly being discriminated against. For instance, the path would run as close as 6 metres away from the house of one of those families. The property cannot be fenced off to protect livestock and the owners have been given no clarity on issues such as liability, should people using the path injure, or be injured by, livestock.
The landowners are also fearful for another reason. The north Sheppey cliffs are unstable and steep, with regular mudslides that see the cliff top disappear. The cost of warding the cliff edge using a helicopter is often called out to rescue people stuck in the mud created by the erosion, yet the proposed path will increase access to that dangerous environment. The risk is even more unacceptable because there are safer and more stable routes for walkers, further away from the cliffs. Yet Natural England refuses to listen to landowners who have witnessed so many near misses, where people straying on to the cliffs have been lucky to escape with their lives.

The danger is summed up by another of my constituents, Susan Goodwin, who told me:

“These cliffs are particularly unstable, and people are constantly getting stuck, requiring rescue by the coastguards. The local council even closed an old footpath to Barrows Brook because of safety issues. Allowing people to wander along the cliff edge is madness”.

Of course, if the cliffs were protected to prevent erosion, the risk would be reduced. Indeed, one of our local farmers put forward a proposal to protect the cliffs by using construction spoil to construct a coastal path in the area. Therein lies another irony: Natural England objected to that plan, because it wants the cliffs to erode. Mr Gapes, you simply could not make it up.

Landowners living on the Isle of Sheppey are not the only constituents who are alarmed at what is happening. Let me give a small example. Lower Halstow is a small village on the mainland that lies on the Medway estuary marshland. The area is popular with walkers, who use the well-established Saxon Shore Way—a path that opened in 1980 and gives fantastic views of the estuary and marshes. However, rather than utilising the Saxon Shore Way, Natural England is insisting on expropriating a farmer’s land to run another coastal path through the farm to the estuary, despite there being no requirement in legislation for the path to continue into an estuary. The landowners believe that that new path will rip the heart out of their farm and have a serious impact on the wildlife habitat that has been carefully nurtured over many years.

Let me quickly explain how that came about. The sea wall that protects the farm was privately funded by the family 60 years ago. That wall has helped to conserve and grow the habitat. The protection of what is an incredible Ramsar wetlands site is the responsibility of the landowners, and they do not begrudge or shirk that responsibility. Now, however, the route of the proposed path will allow free and unfettered public access across a very vulnerable site. One must question the cost implications of creating that section of the path, given that Natural England itself has said that it does not anticipate a great increase in the number of walkers along it, compared with those using the existing Saxon Shore Way.

Let me read out a quote given to me by another landowner:

“The sole benefit of this scheme is that in some areas it has created more comprehensive access for the public, something that could have been achieved with landowners in a much simpler way, using a carrot and stick approach, rather than the mighty sledgehammer of poorly constructed legislation to crack a small nut”.

I could not agree more. Frankly, this is essentially a land grab that totally contradicts Natural England’s claim that it takes into account land management by landowners. Only somebody or some organisation that has never actually farmed could pursue such a policy.

In addition to the anger and frustration, my constituents have followed the process with growing disbelief. They simply cannot understand why their views and local knowledge have continually been ignored by Natural England. It is baffling that such a worthwhile national project is being delivered in such a Draconian way, unnecessarily affecting negatively the lives and livelihoods of the long-term custodians of our countryside.

I would therefore like the Government to take the following steps to bring some common sense into implementation of the scheme: first, make it clear to Natural England that coastal access is about access to the coast and not to estuaries, such as the Medway estuary; secondly, make it clear that Natural England is not expected to provide full coastal access around estuaries and that existing paths, such as the Saxon Shore Way, are considered suitable alternative means of circumnavigating an estuary; thirdly, encourage Natural England to signpost existing estuary trails from the new coastal path, so that the public can use them as an alternative route when circumnavigating rivers and estuaries; fourthly, instruct Natural England to extend to all small landowners who offer holiday accommodation the protection given to holiday parks; and fifthly, instruct Natural England to pay greater attention to the dangers presented by cliff erosion when planning the route of the coastal path.

My constituents need help, and I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to give them the help and the justice that they deserve.

11.15 am

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 Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and for Henley (John Howell) on contributing to it. Although Lord Gardiner is the Minister responsible for policy when it comes to the England coast path, I am of course happy to respond to the debate, but I will ensure that a copy of Hansard is given to my noble Friend, so that he can respond to some of the specific queries that my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey has raised.

In relation to delivering the coastal path around England, I believe that the intention of the law is clear. The practice that Natural England is supposed to follow is that the needs of landowners are balanced with the aspiration to create a continuous route around the coast of England that will allow walkers to enjoy our stunning coastline, supporting tourism and the visitor economy in rural areas.

Gordon Henderson: Will the Minister give way on that, because it is a very important statement? She is effectively saying that Natural England should be using common sense and balancing the needs of the landowner with the need for a path. Is that right?
Dr Coffey: The duty is on Natural England to create this path around the coast of England. It builds somewhat on rights that were given with the right to roam under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Very specifically, Parliament, in the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, placed a duty on Natural England to identify this route and a margin of land adjacent to the route for people to use for rest and recreation. Yes, this is about getting the balancing element right with the specific design of the path, but there is, as far as I am aware, no exemption for Natural England to ignore parts of the coast of our country in that regard.

England has about 2,700 miles of coastline, and 70% of that already has a legally secure right of access, as my hon. Friend pointed out. However, there is no doubt that in places the continuity of the access is patchy, meaning that walkers may find that they are unable to make further progress, sometimes even after just 1 or 2 miles, which has a detrimental effect on encouraging walking at the coast.

On completion, this coastal path will join the 2,500-mile network of national trails, which are long-distance walking routes that are maintained by trail partnerships to a higher standard than ordinary rights of way, to reflect their status and the popularity of walking in our nation’s finest countryside. On some of the routes, access for horse riders and cyclists is also provided.

There are benefits to bringing the England Coast Path to fruition. My hon. Friend was right to point out that that is behind schedule; I will address that point further in my speech. In essence, access to the natural environment is known to improve our mental and physical health. Access to the coast brings a more diverse range of people together to enjoy that natural heritage than the interests of those whose land might be affected by that proposed new access. In preparing its proposals, Natural England should consider all relevant factors and the public interest in having new access rights over land and areas subject to coastal erosion.

Gordon Henderson: Will the Minister accept that the landowners have the right to be protected from the mental stress that has been caused to them in seeing their hard-earned income being stolen from them by what they see as state intervention?

Dr Coffey: Because this is the first time that I have heard the specifics of the issues relating to land in my hon. Friend’s constituency, I do not feel qualified to provide an individual comment on a particular issue.

Gordon Henderson: But the principle?

Dr Coffey: But the principle is clear, and Parliament legislated for this coastal path to come into force and Natural England is under a duty to bring that forward. As I have said, the guidance is clear: engaging with stakeholders and landowners is a cornerstone of that approach. Nevertheless, Natural England has a duty under the law to take forward the coastal path.

Consultation and dialogue are supposed to form the cornerstone of the approach. I am conscious that landowners in my hon. Friend’s constituency feel ignored. The process that Natural England must follow when identifying proposed alignments for the path is described in detail in the coastal access scheme, which is the approved statutory methodology for delivering the path.

Understanding the strategic issues present on an individual stretch and working towards solutions to any concerns should be achieved through extensive dialogue with the landowners and occupiers, as well as the local authorities and other local interests. Natural England will also maintain frequent contact with the national stakeholder organisations as it develops its thinking on suitable alignments for each stretch of the path.

I am keenly aware that we have to continue to do as much as we can to ensure that there is meaningful engagement with landowners on the more complex stretches of the path, which are currently in development. Therefore, I expect Natural England to work carefully to identify all the legal interests on any stretch, and ensure that its emerging proposals are communicated to those interested parties early and in an easily understandable way. I also expect Natural England to ensure that adequate time is given to negotiating alignments on those stretches that include particularly complex features.

The 2009 Act requires a fair balance between the public interest in having new access rights over land and the interests of those whose land might be affected by that proposed new access. In preparing its proposals, Natural England should consider all relevant factors along a section of a stretch, and gauge the need for intervention in relation to any particular concerns raised by landowners and occupiers. Where intervention is considered necessary, the principle of the least restrictive option will be applied to the scope of the intervention.

Once Natural England has published its proposals for a stretch in a coastal access report, there will be an eight-week period for owners, occupiers and others to object and make representations about Natural England’s proposals. Any such objections will be independently considered by an inspector from the Planning Inspectorate, who will then make a report, which is presented to the Secretary of State, with recommendations on whether Natural England’s proposals have struck a fair balance.

The final decision on the approval of Natural England’s proposals will be taken by the Secretary of State, who must have regard to the recommendations in the inspector’s report. With that in mind, my hon. Friend will understand why I cannot comment specifically on the local issues that he has raised, given that it is subject to that quasi-judicial process.

In my constituency, I share the challenge of coastal erosion faced by my hon. Friend. We have met before to discuss the particular challenges that he faces. Provisions in the 2009 Act mean that the route can change in response to those challenges—a process known as roll back. When applying roll back to a stretch, Natural England will consult with landowners to ensure a fair balance.

My hon. Friend mentioned a particular part of the northern coast of the Isle of Sheppey. In my consistency there is a similar area with estuaries. I am conscious of the impact of walkers not following the path and getting too close to the cliff, which entails risks, as he highlighted regarding his own constituency, as well as the impact that walkers can have on flood defences and walls, which may become the paths. Therefore, I have taken up this matter as a constituency MP as well as an Environment Minister, to ensure that Natural England considers these matters carefully when looking at both estuaries and areas subject to coastal erosion.
If my hon. Friend believes that Natural England is not considering those issues proactively in the designation of the path, I would be interested to see the details regarding that, to which I would expect Lord Gardiner to respond.

Gordon Henderson: As a constituency MP, I have raised the issue with the Minister. I have to say, her response was very disappointing. At that time I was raising the issue of cliff erosion. This path will go on the edge of the cliff. As I pointed out in my speech, the erosion could be resolved by shoring up the cliffs, but Natural England’s position, supported by the Minister, was that it wants to see the cliffs erode into the sea.

Each year the path will have to be moved further back due to erosion, and eventually it will run through the gardens of some of my constituents. That is lunacy. Is it not better to use the alternative path? The options have been provided to Natural England, but it is ignoring them.

Dr Coffey: I do not know the detail of the alternative path. I do not know how close it is the coast. Again, I will not comment on specific schemes, because ultimately I am not the decision maker when it comes to that. I will share my hon. Friend’s comments with Lord Gardiner.

One reason for the delay in this process is that a European Court of Justice judgment was handed down in April 2018, known colloquially as “People over wind”. It affects the way Natural England manages the impact of its proposals on sites with nature conservation designations, as my hon. Friend mentioned. That has affected the pace of the path’s delivery, and Natural England has had to consider it carefully. It intends to continue to work towards opening as much of the path as possible by 2020.

I am sure that Lord Gardiner would be interested to understand more about my hon. Friend’s proposals for treating people with holiday accommodation in the same way as the holiday park. I will ensure that that is brought to Lord Gardiner’s attention. I would be surprised if Natural England was not taking the erosion into account, because it has done so in my constituency. If there is a lack of consistency in different parts of the country, Natural England should consider that urgently, especially regarding the proposals in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does the Minister accept that there is a lack of consistency in the approach to estuaries? Will she explain why the Government have objected to my Coastal Path (Definition) Bill, which would have required this path to go along the coast, rather than into estuary areas? It would be a straightforward change of policy imposed upon Natural England, because it is not prepared to apply common sense itself.

Dr Coffey: I understand that my hon. Friend is keen to avoid the coastal path deviating from the line of the coast, whether through an estuary or not. It is appropriate to consider that again. Like most MPs, I think of an example from my constituency, where there is a huge detour along the path through an estuary, but in essence it is still a path; otherwise, one would need a boat to cross the estuary in order to continue the walking experience.

It is appropriate for Natural England to consider estuaries but, as with similar issues, they need to be considered on a local basis. It may be appropriate to consider other ways of getting the walker from one side of the coast to the other, depending on the nature of the estuary involved. However, it will vary by area. That is why I do not believe we can take a general, principled approach. Sometimes a detailed design is there to account for the local conditions, which will not be the same on the Isle of Sheppey or in Christchurch as they are in Suffolk Coastal or other parts of the country. Ruling out certain areas is not the right way to proceed on a national basis.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the England coast path happens, but I am conscious of the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey has raised. I have tried to use my constituency experience to inform Natural England, as it progresses the issues of the coastal path, particularly when it comes to erosion and estuaries. I will continue to do that.

I will encourage Lord Gardiner to look carefully at these issues. I expect that it will still not be possible for any letter that my hon. Friend receives to give detailed responses on the courses of action, given that Ministers have to wait for the Planning Inspectorate report, so that the Secretary of State can make a decision on that particular stretch of the coastal path.

I appreciate that some of my comments will not satisfy my hon. Friend. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey was right to bring this matter to the House’s attention. It will receive further detailed consideration.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Facial Recognition and the Biometrics Strategy

[SIR ROGER GALE in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered facial recognition and the biometrics strategy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. First, I must declare my interests, which are not directly in the subject but in the privacy and data protection space in which I practise as a lawyer, as set out in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I chair various technology all-party parliamentary groups and Labour Digital. I am also a member of the Science and Technology Committee, which has an ongoing inquiry into the subject. We have taken evidence from Professor Paul Wiles, the Biometrics Commissioner, and Baroness Williams of Trafford, the Minister in the other place. Some hon. Members have sent their apologies, which I entirely understand, because we are competing with the climate change debate in the main Chamber.

Why did the subject first come to my attention? As a consumer, I have become increasingly used to using facial recognition technology, whether I have proactively agreed to it or not. I often forget my passwords these days, because I use my face to pay for things and open my iPad and phone, although as I was saying to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), that can prove tricky when I am trying to pay for things at a distance. For many of us, facial recognition technology provides consumer services on Facebook and Google by auto-tagging friends and family members and allowing us to search our images. There is an entire debate to be had about consent, transparency and privacy in the use of such technologies in the private sector, but my focus today is on the role of the state, the police and the security services in the use of facial recognition technology.

Facial recognition technology is beginning to be used more widely. It is well known to those who take an interest in it that the South Wales police has used it at public protests, although perhaps I understand why; I will come on to that later in relation to our freedom of association.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on a key subject. He has spoken light-heartedly about the competition with the climate change debate. Does he agree that in some ways, as with climate change, although only a small number of issues are currently associated with this topic, the range of impacts that facial recognition technology will have on our society and economy, on the way we work and do business, and on our trust relationships will be huge and will grow over time?

Darren Jones: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. She and I often end up in these types of debates in this place. One thing that they have in common is that the technology is changing and the services are becoming more mature at such a pace that the regulation and concerns are often slower. As legislators, we need to understand the technology as well as we can and make sure that the appropriate protections are in place.

In other spaces, we talk about the fact that I have a date of birth, I am male, I have two daughters and I am a vegan, which means that companies profile me and suggest that I might like to buy Quorn sausages that children like. There is a public debate about that, of course, but facial recognition technology is a particularly sensitive area of personal data. Such technology can be used without individuals really knowing it is happening, as I will come on to shortly, which is a big issue. It is not just police forces that are interested in the technology; some councils are using it to enforce certain rules, as is the private sector, as I say.

Facial recognition technology uses two methods: live auto-facial recognition, which is referred to as AFR Locate, and non-live auto-facial recognition, which is referred to as AFR Identify. What does Locate do?

When such technologies are being trialled—although some police forces have been trialling such technologies for many years, so the definition of trial is important—cameras will build a biometric map of the face and facial features of members of the public who are walking down the high street, through a shopping centre or at a sporting or music event. That builds a numerical code that identifies them as individuals, which is matched against a database of images to identify them using the technology. That spurs an action by the police force or others, should they feel that that individual is high risk or has broken the law and some enforcement needs to be taken against them.

As I have alluded to, unlike fingerprints, which people have to proactively give, the technology is so pervasive that many people will walk past the cameras not really knowing that they are taking part in the process and, therefore, not consenting to it. As I will come on to shortly, the rules in place for the use of facial recognition technology are non-existent.

On non-live AFR, the so-called Identify scheme, I will focus on the databases that are being used. After we have built the facial image—the map or code of a person’s face—we match it against a database of images. What is that database and where do those images come from? The police have watch lists of people they are concerned about. Obviously, we want terror suspects to be on a watch list so that the police can do their job properly. There has been a question about scraping social media for images that police forces can match against. Can the Minister confirm that today? If we are doing that in an untargeted fashion for those about whom there are legitimate concerns, we ought not to be. There are also custody images on databases such as the police national database, about which there are long-running concerns, as we have heard on my Select Committee. When the police take someone’s picture and put it on to the PND, it stays there. It does not matter whether they are convicted and go on to a list of people with convictions—perhaps we would understand if that were the case—or they are found innocent or no action is taken against them; their images are kept on the database anyway.
We have known for many years that the way the police have been processing the facial images of innocent citizens is unlawful. In the High Court in 2012, in the case of RMC and FJ v Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, the High Court was clear that it was being managed unlawfully. The Home Office responded, albeit some years later—I am not entirely sure why it took so long to respond to such an important issue—setting out a six-year review period in which the police would have to review the images on the database to decide whether they should weed and take out the images of innocent citizens. It also said that any of us could proactively ask the police force to remove our images because we claim our innocence.

There are several problems with that. Unsurprisingly, the number of requests to remove facial images from the database has been low, because people do not know about it. The fact that people have to proactively prove their innocence to not be on a police database is also fundamentally an issue. It is well known, however: the minutes from the September meeting of the Law Enforcement Facial Images and New Biometrics Oversight and Advisory Board say that “most forces were struggling to comply” with the Government’s response to the High Court’s ruling of unlawfulness. In answer to my questions in the Select Committee hearing, the Minister in the other place and her officials confirmed that no additional resource had been given to police forces to respond to or promote the fact that people can request the removal of their images from the database, or to undertake the review in which they are supposed to weed out and delete the images that they are not keeping on the database.

Evidently, the system is not fit for purpose. In my view, we continue to act in a way that the High Court said was unlawful, and I know that the Information Commissioner has also expressed concern. It will be useful if the Minister sets out how the Government will act to improve the situation, not only in terms of resourcing and support for police forces across the country but in terms of honouring the Government’s commitment to build new databases, so that the process can be automatic. Technology is pretty advanced now in terms of recognising and facial recognition. If Facebook is able to identify me, tag me and take an action, and if Google is able to identify me and allow me to search for myself online, surely the Government ought to be able to auto-scan images, identify people who are not criminals and automatically delete the images of them. That ought to be deliverable. Indeed, it was our understanding that such a system was being delivered, but only a few weeks ago, when I asked Baroness Williams, the Minister in the House of Lords with responsibility for this issue, when we could expect the new computer system to be delivered, there was stony silence from the Minister and her officials. They were not clear when it was going to be delivered, why it had been indefinitely delayed and whether the delay was due to financing, contractual issues or technology issues. There was no clarity about how the existing system would be fixed.

We found in 2012 that the system was unlawful in relation to civil liberties. That in 2019 going into 2020, we do not know what we are doing to fix it or how it will be fixed. It is wholly unsatisfactory. Will the Minister give us a clearer update today about when the automatic deletion service will be available to police forces?

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way to me again. He has made some very important points about the way in which this technology is already being used by Facebook and others, but is it not the case that, however advanced the technology is, it has also been found that it can be biased because of the training data that has been used, which means that particularly those from minorities or specific groups are not recognised adequately? Does he agree that it is all the more important that there is investment as well as transparency in the police database, so that we can ensure that groups who are already marginalised in many ways, particularly with regard to police services, are not once again being discriminated against?

Darren Jones: Unsurprisingly, I agree entirely. This is part of a much broader conversation about designing technology with ethics at the very start, not only in facial recognition but in algorithmic decision making and a host of different areas where we have seen that human biases have been hardwired into automated decision processes that are delivered through technological solutions.

The Government have a really important role to play here, not just in setting the regulatory framework and building on, and really giving strength and resource to, the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation to set the national and international tone, but through their procurement of services. They must say, “We have got to get this technology right. We are going to buy these systems, but we really must see this ethics by design right from the very beginning, dealing with biases in a way that allows us to avoid biased solutions.” That would stimulate the market to ensure that it delivered on that basis.

On the legal basis for biometrics, older forms of biometrics such as DNA and fingerprints have a legal framework around them; they have guidance and rules about how they can be used, stored and processed. There is no specific law relating to facial recognition and no specific policy from the Home Office on it. The police forces that are trialling these systems say that they are using existing legislation to give them the legal basis on which to perform those trials, but the fact of the matter is that we only need to look at the dates of that legislation to see that those laws were put in place way before the technology came into existence or before it reached the maturity that we are seeing today.

There was some debate during the passage of the Data Protection Act 2018, when I, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley and others served on the Committee scrutinising that Bill, but there was no specific discussion during that process or any specific regulation arising from it about facial recognition technology. If police are relying on the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984—perhaps there is an irony in the date of that legislation—the basis and the understanding of the technology did not exist at that time, so it is not in that legislation. Even the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 is too old. The definition of biometrics in that legislation cannot encapsulate a proper understanding of the use, sensitivity and application of automatic facial recognition.

I am not alone in saying this—indeed, it seems to be the view of everybody but the Government. The Information Commissioner has opened investigations;
the independent biometrics and forensics ethics group for facial recognition, which advises the Home Office, agrees with me; the London Policing Ethics Panel agrees with me; the independent Biometrics Commissioner agrees with me; and, perhaps unsurprisingly, civil liberties groups such as Liberty and Big Brother Watch not only agree with me but are involved in legal action against various police forces to challenge the legal basis on which these biometrics trials are being conducted. When he responds, will the Minister say that the Government now agree with everybody else, or that they continue to disagree with everybody else and think that this situation is okay?

I will now address the second part of this debate, which is the biometrics strategy. I focused on facial recognition because it is a particularly timely and sensitive component of a broader biometrics strategy. All of us who use technology in our daily lives know that biometric markers and data can be used to identify our location, identity and communications. That means that the Government and, indeed, the private sector can access data and learn things about us, and that area of technology is growing. People are rightly concerned about ensuring that the right checks and balances are in place. It is one thing for an individual to agree to facial recognition technology in order to unlock their tablet or phone, having read, I hope, about what happens to their data. It is another thing, however, for them not to be given the opportunity to give their consent, or not to receive a service and therefore not know about it, when the state is using the same types of technology.

The biometrics strategy needs to get into the detail. It needs to set out not only what is happening now but what is envisaged will happen in the future and what the Government plan to do about it, in order to protect civil liberties and inform citizens about how the data is being used. Clearly, they would not be informed individually—there is no point in telling a terrorist planning an incident that there will be a camera—but the right balance can be achieved.

Again, I do not understand why the Government are so slow in responding to these fundamental issues. It is so long since the 2012 High Court ruling on the retention of custody images, and we had to wait five years for the biometrics strategy. Imagine how much the biometrics sector in this country changed during those five years. Perhaps the Government were trying to keep up with the pace of change in the technology space, but the strategy was long delayed and long awaited.

Given my tone, Sir Roger, you will not be surprised to hear that everyone was very disappointed with the biometrics strategy, because it merely gave a kind of literature review of current uses of biometric data. There was a little bit about the plans for a new platform, which the Home Office is building, regarding how different people use access biometric data. It said nothing at all, however, about the future use, collection and storage of biometric data, or about data protection. It said nothing about the Government’s own use and collection of data; the need for enforceable guidelines to enable devolved decision making by, for instance, police forces across the country; how different Departments might be able to use different forms of biometric data across Government, which, evidently, is very easy to deliver with today’s technology; or how the data would be stored securely.

People are concerned about cyber-security and breaches of their personal data, so what steps will the Government take in this developing space? Where will the data be stored? In advance of this debate, I received representations arguing that we should not send it to companies overseas and that it should be stored in the UK. One would think that the biometrics strategy addressed those issues, but it does not. Is the beta version of the biometrics strategy due soon, or does the Minister think that the Government have provided a sufficient response on this important field?

I do not want to keep saying that everybody agrees with me, because that would be a little uncomfortable, but there is no denying that the Biometrics Commissioner, the Surveillance Camera Commissioner and the Information Commissioner’s Office have all said exactly the same thing—this biometrics strategy is not fit for purpose and needs to be done again. The Government need to be clearer and more transparent about their endeavours and make that clear to the public, not least because these areas of technology move at pace. I understand entirely why police forces, civil servants or others want to be able to take the opportunities to deliver services more efficiently and with more impact—we support that—but the right checks and balances must be in place.

I will touch on our fundamental rights and freedoms, because that debate does not get enough air time in the technology space. Our freedoms are increasingly being challenged, whether the issue is cyber-defence or how we regulate the online world, and also in this space. Fundamental freedoms—freedoms that we hold, or purport to hold, dear—are encapsulated in the European convention on human rights and the Human Rights Act 1998. They go to the very nature of this technology, such as the right to a private life that can only be interfered with for a legitimate aim and only if that interference is done proportionately. Scanning a load of people going about their day-to-day life does not feel proportionate to me, and there is no accountability to make sure that it is being done legitimately. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said, if the selection that those technologies pick up are resulting in false matches or are discriminating, primarily against women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds, that also ought to be considered.

Those freedoms also include freedom of expression and of association. In public protests in recent weeks, people who dearly hold certain views have gone too far by moving away from their right to freedom of expression and to peaceful demonstration, towards criminal activity, intimidation or hostility. We should set the tone and say that that is not welcome or acceptable in our country, because having a right also means having a responsibility to use it wisely. Of course we want to protect those who want to demonstrate through peaceful public protests. I am sure the public will say—this lies at the heart of my contribution—“Fine. Use some of this technology to keep us safe, but what is the right balance? Do we understand how it is being used? What are the accountability measures? What rules and guidance are being put down by the Government, on behalf of Parliament and the people, to make sure this is being done in a way that is not a slippery slope towards something we ought not to be doing?” We need a wider debate in public life about how we protect freedoms in this new digital age, and this issue is an example of that.
The House of Commons digital engagement programme is often a very good process for Westminster Hall debates, as it allows the public to be part of the conversation and to submit their comments. It would be remiss of me to not point out that some members of the public highlighted a certain irony in the fact that this debate was being promoted on Facebook, so I have shared their concerns, but that is still a medium through which the public like to engage in debate. Hundreds of thousands of people engaged across different platforms—way more than I was expecting—which shows the level of public interest in the use of these technologies.

As might be expected, there were two sides to the argument. The minority view on the platforms was, “I have nothing to hide. Please go out and keep us safe. Crack on, use it.” The other side said, “Actually, this is a slippery slope. I don’t know how this is used, and I’m worried about it. Why can’t I go about my day-to-day life without the police or the state surveilling me?”

I will share some of the comments. On the first side of the argument was Roy. I do not know where he is from. I wish his location had been given, because I could have said, “Roy from Sheffield”. He said:

“No objection. I’ve nothing to hide and don’t find it scary or objectionable for ‘the state’ to be able to track my movements. They already can if I’m in a car”—I did not know that—“and that doesn’t seem to be a problem. The added security of the police being able to track potential terrorists far outweighs any quibbles about reduced privacy.”

That is a perfectly legitimate view.

Karyn said:

“Having seen the numbers of crimes solved and even prevented by CCTV I have no objections. Today we have to be realistic, with phones listening in on conversations for marketing and plotting where we are, this is small price to pay for public safety and if you have done nothing there is nothing to fear.”

That is an interesting contribution on what is happening in the private and state sectors. We need to be much more advanced in both spheres.

That was a minority view, however. I do not have the percentage, but the bulk of comments came from people who are concerned. Chris Wylie, who many of us will have read about—he was the Cambridge Analytica whistle-blower, so he clearly knows something about these issues—was firm:

“No. Normalising this kind of indiscriminate surveillance undermines the presumption of innocence.”

We should pause on that, because it is really important. Why should we be tracked and surveilled by the police on the assumption that we might be guilty of something? That does not feel right, just as it does not feel right that people have to prove their innocence to get their images taken off a police database. Chris went on to say:

“It should never be up to us as citizens to prove we are not criminals. Police should only interfere with our lives where they have a reasonable suspicion and just cause to do so.”

Andrea said that this was a slippery slope:

“The idea that some people have about privacy as an exclusive issue for the bad guys is completely wrong. Not only privacy prevents my acts from limiting my rights but also avoids an unjustified use of power by the Gov’t.”

Again, we should pause there. It is our job in Parliament to hold the Government to account, yet we have no strategy, legislation or rules to enable us to do so. That is a fundamental problem. She goes on to say:

“Such a huge involvement of disturbing tech could lead to a 1984-like slippery slope, one which none of us wants to fall in, regardless of their legal background.”

Jenny said:

“I believe that this would suppress people’s ability to engage in public demonstrations and activities that challenge the government, which is hugely dangerous to democracy.”

A lot of people said that if they thought the state was scanning their data and putting it on a database, they might not associate with or take part in public demonstrations. If that were to happen, it would represent a significant diminution of our democratic processes.

Lastly, Bob said:

“It makes it easier for a future, less liberal government to monitor the activity of dissident citizens. During the miners strike in the 1980s miners were stopped from travelling just on the suspicion they would attend rallies based on their home locations and where they were heading. How would this technology be applied in the future for, say, an extinction rebellion march?”

Regardless of our political disagreements across the House, none of us thinks that the state is overreaching in a way that many other countries would. However, given the lack of legislation, guidance and regulation to enable us to hold the Government to account, and with independent commissioners and regulators saying that this is not good enough, I agree with Bob. There is a huge risk in not putting in place a framework with the appropriate checks, balances and protections, not just because that is the right and important thing to do today, but because we need that framework for future Governments.

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time, and I congratulate him again on having raised this important topic. Does he agree, as I think he is suggesting, that the level of interest in this debate—demonstrated by the quotes he has read out—shows that technology such as facial recognition, as well as algorithms and data, needs to be publicly debated? We can make a choice as to how it is used, so that citizens are empowered. Technology should not be something that is done to people; they should have rights and controls as to how it is enacted.

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The debate is a broader one about technology. How do we engage the public with these issues? I am an evangelist for technological reform, although I will not go on about that topic for too long, because it is not linked to the title of the debate. In my view, the idea that we can increase our economy’s productivity, increase wages, transform people’s working lives and reform and make more efficient our public services without using technology does not make sense. As my hon. Friend says, however, we have to do that in the right way and bring the public with us.

On a cross-party basis, we share the belief that we need to take crime seriously, and to address the increasingly sophisticated methods that criminals and terrorists may employ when trying to commit crimes or terror in our country. However, we must get the balance right, and there is a lacuna of regulation in this space. There are no legal bases, there is no oversight, and as a consequence there are no protections. That is why the Government should act now.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on presenting the case very well. We spoke before the
...errors for low-resolution surveillance footage they would like. People's right to practise their religion in the way that it's understood is guilty of many human rights abuses. I am very concerned at how China can use facial recognition to suppress human rights and religious minorities in a country that, let us understand, is a Big Brother state. I am always very conscious of that Big Brother state.

I thank the Library for the background information. I read the paper this morning of a suspect in China who was wanted in relation to the murder of his mother. He had been missing for two to three years, but facial recognition was installed at the airport and they caught him. That is one of the good things that can happen — those who thought they would get away with a crime are made accountable.

I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. As hon. Members know, I am very interested in such issues. China has apprehended a fugitive and is making him accountable for his crime, but at the same time China uses facial recognition to fence in villagers in the far west of China. That is a very clear illustration of how it uses facial recognition to suppress human rights and to suppress people's right to privacy and how far we can have a security site without a Big Brother state. I am always very conscious of that Big Brother state.

The issue of facial recognition is a complex matter. Of course, anyone who watches American crime dramas—I am one of those people who watches CSI and all the others from about 11 o'clock until 12 midnight before going to bed—will think it is a useful tool for identifying terrorist suspects, which can be right, but Hollywood life and real life are two very different things, and black and white is difficult to have when we consider people's rights to privacy and how far we can have a security site without a Big Brother state. I am always very conscious of that Big Brother state.

The background is clear. The courts ruled in the 2012 RMC case that it was unlawful to hold custody images without making a distinction between those who were convicted and those who were not. In response, the Home Office has introduced a system to allow unconvicted individuals to request the deletion of their images. We understand the system and that is all great, but it is an opt-out scenario; the individual must ask for the deletion of their image. I am not sure how many people would think of doing so; I suspect it would be the last thing on many people's mind, with their busy lives. I know I probably would not think of doing so. I would not know that my images have been stored away for a rainy day to be pulled out, even though I am completely innocent. The presumption, “You may well do something someday” is not enough of a reason to hold on to these things. An arrest must be made for fingerprints to be taken and stored, and yet no arrest is needed for images of a person in the background of an event to be taken and perpetually stored by successive Governments—not just this Government, but every Government that comes after, if the legislation is in place.

The excuse of cost is a weighty consideration, and so is the protection of personal identification. I say this honestly: because of my age I have lived through the height of the troubles, when cars were searched, ID was a must and the battle against terrorists was daily. I lived with that, not just as an elected representative, but as a former member of the part-time army—the Territorials and the Ulster Defence Regiment. We seem to be heading that way again. I could understand it if the Government were to make it known that they believed that retaining this process would save lives—I would understand the thinking behind what they are trying to do—but that if necessary, there would be a mechanism to have the information removed. I could understand it if there was that level of transparency. However, to say that the reason is that there is not enough money to do an IT upgrade just does not wash with me, and I suspect it does not wash with others taking part in today's debate.

I agree with the Science and Technology Committee report, “Biometrics strategy and forensic services”, published on 25 May 2018, which states:

“The Government must ensure that its planned IT upgrade...is delivered without delay...to introduce a fully automatic image deletion system for those who are not convicted. If there is any delay in introducing such a system, the Government should move to introduce a manually-processed comprehensive deletion system as a matter of urgency.”

That would be my request to the Minister. We have great respect for the Minister; that goes without saying, but we are very concerned about what is proposed, or could possibly happen, and we have to record those concerns.
I further agree that facial image recognition provides a powerful evolving technology, which could significantly help policing. I am all for that, but everyone must be clear about what is acceptable, what is not acceptable, what is held and for what purpose. That underlines my point that if it is for the sake of security, then say it and we can debate the merits of the case. If that is the purpose, let us debate it honestly, truthfully and in an informed way, to ensure that all concerns are taken on board.

I am all for targeting those on a watchlist or those affiliated with those on a watchlist, as in previous examples of terrorism on the mainland and back home as well, but let us be clear that it is happening, and let us be clear that those who take umbrage against it have the information that they need to ensure that their images are not stored even though they have not committed a crime and are not a person of interest. I am conscious of the need to protect human rights, protect privacy and protect those who are innocent, although I understand the reasons for the process.

In conclusion, I look to you, Minister, as I always do. We must have a chance to debate these issues and make an informed decision about the strategy and the justification for it. I look forward to the report’s coming before us, but I must record my concerns.

3.8 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing it. My speech will be neither as lengthy nor as expert as his. My interest in this matter arises from the issue in my constituency last year when a report in the Manchester Evening News revealed that the intu Trafford Centre had been working with Greater Manchester police to use live facial recognition technology. I had not been made aware of that previously, and as far as I know, none of my constituents, or the other members of the public, knew of it either. Following the report in the Manchester Evening News, the intu Trafford Centre and Greater Manchester police suspended the pilot.

Like my colleagues, I suspect that many of our constituents would support the use of facial recognition and other technologies to prevent crime, keep us safe, catch criminals or trace missing and vulnerable people, which is something that I understand the British Transport police are considering. However, as we have heard, the use of the technology raises a number of issues, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West drew attention to. I have discussed some of them directly with local police in Greater Manchester, and at national level. I am grateful to the police officers who have spoken to me for their openness in those discussions. It is clear that the police themselves feel that there is a pressing need for the national framework that would make effective use of the technology possible. For now, they do not feel they have that.

From my perspective, and in the light of the experience in my constituency, I think that the framework will need to address decision making, who takes a decision to use such technology in a particular context, oversight and, importantly, accountability. How can such use be scrutinised and how can the police and other state authorities be made accountable to the public? I say that because what is happening could constitute a significant intrusion into the privacy of individual citizens whose record contains nothing criminal or threatening, and who are merely going about their daily business. It is important that the use of the technology in relation to the majority of citizens should be both appropriate and proportionate.

Issues that concern me include the size and content of any watchlist that might be constructed—particularly vis-à-vis the effectiveness of the size of the watchlist. In the Manchester Evening News report it was revealed that 30 million people per annum visit the intu Trafford Centre. It is an iconic destination in my constituency. However, over the sixth-month period during which the technology was being deployed, only one positive identification was made. That makes me question whether it was right to draw so many members of the public into the ambit of the experiment, for what seems to be a low level of effectiveness.

We also have to consider where the technology is being used. The police themselves said to me that some events or venues will be more suitable, and some less. Also we need to consider why it is used—at whose initiative or request such technology is deployed. In the Trafford Centre the intu management themselves had suggested it to Greater Manchester police. Is it right that police priorities should be set by the wishes of private enterprises? If that can be right, and in some circumstances there can be a partnership approach between the police and private entities, if the private entity draws a disproportionate benefit from the activity is it not right that it should pay for it? Football clubs pay for additional police protection at football matches.

We have heard concerns about potential ethnic bias in the databases and technologies that are currently available. I am told that what is on the market, as it were, at the moment is better at matching north European and south-east Asian males than other ethnic categories. That relates to the countries in which the algorithms that underpin the technology were developed, but from the public’s point of view we can say that if there is any ethnic disparity, or perception of it, in the way the technologies apply, it is bound to sow public mistrust. It cannot be right that we make use of technologies that do not treat all communities equally.

I have mentioned my concerns about where decisions are taken in police and other public agencies. It has been made clear by regulators that that should be at the most senior strategic level, and in my view it should be in the context of an absolutely transparent national framework. I also think we must think about mechanisms for accountability both to individual members of the public and the community that a police force serves overall.

Finally, while we are not going to halt the speed of spread of technology, and I think that we can expect more resources to go into such technology in the future, there is a question about how we prioritise resources vis-à-vis effectiveness and public buy-in. The static facial recognition technologies that have been used have excited much less contention and public concern. People can understand that the police hold a database of those with previous convictions and criminal records, and that they will check, where they have got someone whom they are not able to identify, against those records. I understand that that database is in need of new investment, which it is not currently scheduled to receive. I ask the Minister whether that might be the first
priority for investment in facial recognition technologies; can the investment that is needed in the police national database be brought forward?

I am glad we have had the opportunity to debate the matter in Parliament today. I would be misleading the House if I suggested that it was causing widespread concern among my constituents, but in fact it should be. How the technology is being used, and the context in which we are made aware of its use, should concern us all. That is not to say it should not be used, but in the absence of a clear legislative or regulatory framework for its use, I do not think it would be right for the House not to ask those questions today.

3.16 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for obtaining the debate. I can testify to his expertise on such issues, having served with him on the Committee that scrutinised the Data Protection Act 2018. I claim no such expertise, so I am grateful to him for succinctly explaining the operation of facial recognition technology in particular. It has been a useful debate. It is a shame that we have clashed with the climate change debate because, as the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said, even if the issue does not cause concern among many of our constituents at the moment, it ought to. There are some important questions that we have to debate and address.

The use of biometrics by police and law enforcement is of course not remotely new, but it is clearly evolving exponentially. It can and does make a huge contribution to detecting and preventing crime: it also has an important role in eliminating innocent individuals from inquiries and it can help to trace missing and vulnerable people, but as all the hon. Members who spoke highlighted, it is a challenge for the legal system to keep pace with changing use. Understandably, there has been particular concern about automatic facial recognition technology.

All the different legal systems in the United Kingdom and beyond face those challenges, and of course Scotland is no different. We kick-started our debate on the issues in 2016 with the report of Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary in Scotland. It concluded that Police Scotland had been making “proportionate and necessary use of Facial Search within PND,” and that it had been operating in accordance with its own policy, Home Office policy, and College of Policing guidance. However, it identified similar concerns to those that have been raised in the debate, and the need for improved legislation, a statutory code of conduct to govern Police Scotland’s use of biometric data, and better independent oversight.

The main legislation relating to biometrics in Scotland dates from 2010. The hon. Member for Bristol North West mentioned 2012 legislation being out of date already, and I absolutely accept that the 2010 measure is now too old. It predates the time when Police Scotland started to upload photos on to the police national database, in 2011. I understand that the facial search functionality of PND became generally available in March 2014. We do indeed have some catching up to do to make sure that issues to do with images and facial recognition technology are properly covered in legislation.

Following the inspectorate report, the Independent Advisory Group on the Use of Biometric Data in Scotland was established to produce more detailed proposals for plugging some of the gaps and setting up a more ethical and human rights-based framework. I thoroughly recommend the group’s report—it is a fascinating read. It draws on a range of expertise, not just from members of the group, but from the police, human rights and data protection groups, and experts such as the Biometrics Commissioner, the Forensic Science Regulator and the Biometrics and Forensics Ethics Group, which advises the Home Office. The report found that “those involved in this field in Police Scotland...appear to work to very high standards of international repute, with a good grasp of the ethical and human rights implications of their work.” It also made several recommendations about enhancing the legislative framework and oversight. Specifically, it recommended a Scottish biometrics commissioner and an ethics advisory group. It recommended a new legislative framework, accompanied by a code of practice, and made more detailed policy recommendations that I will come to shortly. I am pleased that those recommendations have been accepted by the Scottish Government. A public consultation has been held, and a biometric data Bill will soon be introduced to implement them. That is the right approach, and hopefully it will deliver the comprehensive framework that hon. Members have argued for today.

Let me turn to two of the most controversial aspects of the debate. In Scotland, 2010 legislation allows Police Scotland to retain fingerprints and DNA data from convicted individuals indefinitely. Data from individuals prosecuted for certain sexual and violent offences may be retained for three years, regardless of whether there is a conviction, and the chief constable can apply to the sheriff for a two-year extension. More generally, data from individuals who have been arrested for an offence must be destroyed if they are not convicted or if they are granted an absolute discharge. Usual practice for photographs also follows that regime, which is slightly different from what happens in England and Wales, particularly with regard to the disposal of photographs of those who have not been charged or convicted.

Is that the perfect approach? I do not think we can answer that conclusively; we must be led by the evidence as it develops. It is perfectly legitimate to question whether a blanket policy of the indefinite retention of biometrics after every conviction is reasonable, because, as the advisory group pointed out, there is no abundance of evidence to suggest what degree of retention has proved the most useful. Biometric data is likely to be more useful in identifying the perpetrators of some crimes compared with others, but the risk of offending and reoffending involves a range of factors, including many individual aspects. In an ideal world, the length of time
we kept biometric data would be decided for each individual case, but that is not a practical approach, so we must consider the evidence gathered and do the best we can.

The use of automated facial recognition systems is hugely problematic, and our general approach must be evidence led. If such technology is to be used, it must be used only where necessary, and it must be done proportionately and on as targeted and limited a basis as possible. There are huge concerns about the impact of such technology on privacy and freedoms such as the freedom of assembly, and there is a danger of bias and discrimination. Studies have shown that such technology can disproportionally misidentify women and black and minority ethnic people, and as a consequence people from those groups are more likely to be wrongly stopped and questioned.

We must by now have sufficient evidence from forces in London and south Wales to show what automated recognition could look like in practice, what it is capable of achieving, and the price to be paid for that achievement. I will not say that I envisage no circumstances where the use of such technology could be justified—for example, it could be used to counter a specific and serious threat or danger—and I am probably somewhere between Roy and Chris in the range of views set out earlier. Nevertheless, I would be reluctant to see such technology rolled out in Scotland before the new regulatory and oversight regime is in force and before issues of bias and discrimination have been addressed. It seems sensible to stop the use of the technology elsewhere until its implications have been fully assessed and debated, sufficient checks are in place, and there is sufficient public support.

I will end with a quote from the advisory group:

“In this context, it is essential that sensitive personal data are collected only for specific, explicit, lawful and legitimate purposes. In seeking to achieve a careful balance between the needs of citizen and state, there is clearly a need for independent oversight, and for the development of a broad framework of consistent ethical and human rights respecting principles against which all biometric use for policing, law enforcement and public protection purposes in Scotland can ultimately be checked”.

The SNP supports an approach that involves a comprehensive legislative framework and a regularly updated code of conduct. We need strong oversight through a commissioner to ensure that the use of biometrics is proportionate, necessary and targeted, and respects human rights, privacy and data protection rules. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West on securing this debate. I hope there will be many more to come, with more MPs in attendance, as this important subject requires much more discussion.

3.25 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. This excellent discussion has been informed by expert opinion, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), whom I congratulate on securing this important debate. I think the public would be shocked to hear about the lack of legislative framework and guidance, and the potential for such intrusion into people’s lives by the state.

My hon. Friend spoke about the need for us all to understand the technology that could be used, and to ensure that the frameworks we set out are relevant and keep pace with legislation. That must be informed by a principles-based framework, because legislation will never keep up with the technology used by law enforcement or private operators. Several Members mentioned the police national database and the unlawful processing of custody images by police forces. That is not a good starting point for this debate, given that the Home Office’s response to that issue has been poor and the delays in the auto-deletion of images are worrying.

My hon. Friend mentioned the need for ethics by design to ensure that any biases, particularly against people from BME backgrounds, are built out of such technologies from the beginning and are not allowed to be replicated and harden. He described well the astonishing fact that there is no legal basis for these invasive, pervasive technologies and highlighted clear gaps in the biometric strategy in failing to address those issues. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke powerfully about the consequences of false positives, and raised basic questions about the rights of innocent people. Those questions should be answered. We should not need to hold this debate to speak about the right of innocent people not to have their privacy undermined, and about the police unlawfully holding images of people who have committed no crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) spoke about her personal experience and the Trafford Centre in her constituency. She made the important point—I have had the same conversation—that the police want and need a transparent, national and consistent framework, because they feel that they have to make things up as they go along. Experiences will differ: South Wales police has demonstrated a completely different attitude from the Met’s in rolling out facial recognition, and it cannot be right for people to experience different technologies in completely different ways and with different attitudes, depending on the police force in the area where they live.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend is right to say that the police want a clear, national framework, and it cannot be right that different police forces operate in different ways. Greater Manchester police has stopped using that technology altogether, but there may be circumstances where we would like it to be deployed to keep us safe.

Louise Haigh: That is completely right, and that is why this debate and the framework are so important. We cannot allow the police, with all the best intentions, to attempt to use this technology and then in some cases to mess it up—as they will—and have to roll it back. We want to ensure that the framework is in place so that the police can go ahead with confidence and the public have confidence. We must ensure that biases are designed out and that people accept the intrusion into their privacy and understand that such technology is being used proportionately and out of necessity. At the moment we cannot have confidence in that, which is why this debate is so important.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, not least because I spoke at great length today. I did not mention earlier that we took evidence in the Select Committee from the Biometrics Commissioner that trials should be conducted on the basis of rigorous scientific guidelines and processes. The problem is that if we let different police forces do different things in different ways, we do not get clear answers on how and
in what circumstances the technology can best be used. We need guidelines not just for the regulatory purposes, but so that the trials can be done in the right way.

Louise Haigh: That is absolutely right. I do not get a strong impression that individual police forces are learning from each other either. In the case of the Met, the word “trial” has been used for the technology’s use at Notting Hill carnival. It has been trialled for three years in a row. When does a trial become a permanent fixture? I do not think that that can now be called a trial. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that if it is a trial, we should be gathering data, and they should be informing Parliament and the public and should be addressing the concerns around false positives and ethnic biases and whether it is being used proportionately. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston gave the astonishing figure that demonstrated the mismatch between the numbers of people who were covered by the facial recognition technology when just one individual was identified. That surely cannot be proportionate.

The question of technology within law enforcement gets to the heart of public consent for policing in this day and age, and the issues we have discussed today represent only the tip of the iceberg of potential privacy issues. So much of what defines an investigation today is data-driven. Data-driven policing and data-led investigations are transforming policing. It is already completely unrecognisable from when I was a special constable only 10 years ago. The police have the scope to access more of the intimate details of our personal lives than ever before.

The trialling of technology—including facial recognition and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West mentioned, risk assessment algorithms—has not been adequately considered by Parliament and does not sit easily within the current legal framework, but it is having some phenomenal results that we should not ignore. The identification of images of child sexual abuse rely on hashing technology, which enables law enforcement and the Internet Watch Foundation to scrape hundreds of thousands of images off the internet each year.

This week, we have had the news on what is in essence compulsion for rape victims to hand over their mobile phones for what potentially amounts to an open-ended trawl of data and messages, without which there is little prospect of conviction. That high-profile debate has lifted the lid on the ethical questions that ubiquity of data; they also provide recommendations to law enforcement agencies to act, to stop and search, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West mentioned, risk assessment algorithms—has not been adequately considered by Parliament and does not sit easily within the current legal framework, but it is having some phenomenal results that we should not ignore. The identification of images of child sexual abuse rely on hashing technology, which enables law enforcement and the Internet Watch Foundation to scrape hundreds of thousands of images off the internet each year.

As I said, we had some debates on this issue in the Data Protection Bill Committee, where we attempted to strengthen the legislation on privacy impact assessments. It should be clear, and I do not believe that it is, that police forces should be required to consult the Information Commissioner and conduct a full PIA before using any facial recognition tools.

I am further worried that the responsibility for oversight is far from clear. As we have heard, software has been trialled by the Met, the South Wales police force and other police forces across the country, particularly in policing large events. In September last year, the Minister made it clear in response to a written question that there is no legislation regulating the use of CCTV cameras with facial recognition. The Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 introduced the regulation of overt public space surveillance cameras, and as a result the surveillance camera code of practice was issued by the Secretary of State in 2013. However, there is no reference to facial recognition in the Act, even though it provides the statutory basis for public space surveillance cameras. The Surveillance Camera Commissioner has noted that “clarity regarding regulatory responsibility” for such facial recognition software is “an emerging issue”. We need clarity on whether it is the Biometric Commissioner, the Information Commissioner or the Surveillance Camera Commissioner who has ultimate responsibility for this use of technology. It would also be helpful if the Minister made absolutely clear what databases law enforcement agencies are matching faces against, what purposes the technology can and cannot be used for, what images are captured and stored, who can access those images and how long they are stored for.
The Government’s new biometric strategy takes a small step forward on oversight, with a board to evaluate the technology and review its findings, but it meets too infrequently—three times since last July, as far as I can tell—to have effective oversight of the operational use of the technology. In any case, it is clearly not designed to provide operational safeguards, and that is where big questions remain about discriminatory use and effectiveness. The lack of operational safeguards and parliamentary scrutiny may lead to ill-judged uses of the technology.

I am hopeful that the Minister can assure us today of the Government’s intention to make things a lot clearer in this space, that existing and emerging technologies will be covered by clear, consistent guidance and legislation from the Home Office, that the relevant commissioner will have all the powers they need to regulate these technologies, and that our law enforcement agencies fully understand what they need to do, both before any technology or new method of data collection is rolled out, and afterwards, when an individual’s data rights may have been abused. We need clear principles, and I am not convinced that the legislative landscape as it stands provides that.

3.37 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. It was a wrench to come out of the climate change debate in the Chamber, but the debate here has shown that what we are discussing is extremely important. Before I start, I recognise the presence of the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who has joined us. I will of course take an intervention if he wishes to speak.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing the debate and on his excellent speech, which was rooted in genuine passion, deep expertise and a lawyer’s ability to present a case and fill the evidence. It was really interesting. Of course, the context, which the hon. Gentleman was very good at laying out, is huge. We will talk about the police and the attitude of the security services, but ultimately this is a debate about how we protect our personal freedoms in the digital age, to use the hon. Gentleman’s language, and that is an enormous issue. Some hon. Members have already volunteered the opinion that the public are not yet fully engaged with the issue, and I support that from the experience of my constituency, but it is a huge issue.

The other context that we have alluded to and must not lose sight of is the backdrop of the extraordinary acceleration of the pace of change in what technology now enables for good and evil. Therefore, the debate about how far we go in supporting our police system and our security system—those who get up every morning thinking about how they can protect us—in using technology for the power of good is extremely important.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a fundamental issue that underpins the debate. His primary charge against the Government, which was echoed by others, was that the regulatory framework, the legal framework, the oversight arrangements and the governance framework were not fit for purpose. He also said that a fundamental challenge for any Government of any colour is finding ways to keep pace with what is going on out there and make sure that the checks and balances and protections and regulations that are put in place are fit for purpose, against a landscape that is changing all the time.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and for indicating that he was willing to give way. He is making some really important points. When the Biometrics Commissioner gave evidence to our Committee, he gave a clear view that many in the police want a clear statutory framework that they can operate within. They do not want to be uncertain as to whether the next step they take will be subject to legal challenge. Surely it is in everyone’s interests to have a clear statutory framework and to do that now.

Mr Hurd: I understand that point. Although I technically do not lead on this area in the Home Office, in the context of another meeting with many of the chiefs directly involved, I have heard them talk a bit about it. They have not expressed that view directly to me, but that is not good enough. I will go back to them and get their direct view.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West spoke about his case and the legal framework for that. As that is about to be tested through a legal challenge in May, he will know there is a limit to what I can say. I am very up-front in saying that in reviewing the landscape, it is quite clear to me that some of the oversight and governance arrangements are not clear enough. A considerable amount of work is going on in the Home Office to try and improve that situation. That will become clearer over the summer, and I will talk on that.

The other context, if we come specifically to the work of the police—which is what we are basically talking about—is the use of biometrics and data to identify people, based on their personal characteristics. Those data are used by the private sector and the police and are very much part of our day-to-day life, as Members have said in relation to users of Facebook and Google and companies that basically make money out of their information about us. It is part of our day-to-day experience.

As the shadow Minister knows, biometrics have been an essential tool for the police for many years. If we consider that in one year alone, DNA linked more than 32,000 people to crimes, including 700 relating to murders and 700 to rapes, it sharpens the importance of this agenda for those trying to keep the peace and to protect us. For any Government of any colour who recognise that the security of the public will always be a priority, if not the priority, the question of our responsibility and how far we go to ensure that the police can continue to use biometrics and make use of the most up-to-date technologies will always be a priority.

Members have talked about the attitudes of the public, and I am sure they are right. The data I see, whether it comes from Lincolnshire’s police and crime commissioner or the Mayor’s Office for Policing And Crime, reinforces what Members have said. If members of the public are asked, “Should the police use these technologies to catch criminals?”, the answer tends to be yes, particularly in the context of the most serious crimes. We understand that, but that needs to be offset by a much more open and clear debate on the checks, balances and transparency around the use of these technologies. I absolutely understand that, but the pace of change and the opportunity are genuinely exciting for the police services. What is
happening with new mobile fingerprint checkers, for example, is transformative in what they allow the police to do, including the pace with which they can work and the time that they can save by harnessing these technologies. Any Government would want to support their police system in making the best use of technology to protect the public and catch criminals, particularly those involved in the most difficult crimes.

Facial recognition is clearly a massively sensitive issue, and I welcome this debate. We have supported the principle of the pilots, and we can debate the degree to which the appropriate guidance and supervision have been in place for that. It is clear to the police and us that there are real opportunities to make use of facial matches. Generations of police officers have used photographs of people to identify suspects for a long time, and CCTV images have been a vital tool in investigation, but what is changing is our ability to match images with increasing confidence and speed. That is the major change in the technology. In a recent example, images taken by a member of the public in a Coventry nightclub where a murder took place were quickly matched on the police national database to a known individual who was arrested. They found the victim’s blood on his clothing and he is currently serving life imprisonment. We need to be clear about where the opportunity is in terms of matching suspect images on the national police database to wanted known individuals, ensuring that they cannot evade justice when they cross force boundaries.

It is understandable that the use of live facial recognition technology, which is the heart of the debate, raises extremely legitimate privacy concerns. Speaking not only as a Minister or a Member of Parliament but as a member of the public, I absolutely understand and share those concerns. A fundamental part of our democratic process is that those concerns are expressed here in the House or in the courts. The hon. Member for Bristol North West alluded to that. He wants us to go much further on transparency, accountability, governance and oversight, and I will try to set out the progress we hope to make on that, but the fact is that in many countries, these debates just would not take place. It is a strength of our system that we are sitting here in this debating chamber and the Minister is forced to come here and respond, that the Select Committee is able to do the work it does, and that the Government of the day show the Committee the respect it is due. That is our process, and it is not bad.

Norman Lamb: On the retention of images, the Government and successive Governments have been clear that DNA and fingerprints are not retained where someone is not prosecuted and is, in effect, an innocent person; yet with facial recognition, the facial images are retained. There is a mechanism for someone to apply to have their image deleted, but the indication is that people are not routinely told about that. What can possibly be the justification for having a very clear rule applying to DNA and fingerprints and a different rule applying to facial recognition? When are we going to get to the point where there can be automatic deletion of the images of innocent people?

Mr Hurd: I will come to that point, because I know it was a particular focus of the Committee, but first I want to conclude my remarks on facial recognition. The police have responsibilities and duties to prevent, detect and investigate crimes. The police have broad common law powers, as we are aware, that allow them to use relevant technologies, such as surveillance cameras in public places and live facial recognition, but it is clear that such use is not unfettered. The police have to exercise their powers in accordance with the law, including the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, the Human Rights Act 1998 and data protection legislation.

As was alluded to, we also carry out data protection impact assessments before using a new biometric technology and before a new application of an existing technology. That includes inviting scrutiny from an independent ethics panel, regulators and commissioners. I was listening today to the chiefs of one of our largest police forces speaking exactly to that point, when he talked of the importance he attaches to the opinion of his local ethics panel. We will produce DPIAs for each element of the Home Office biometrics programme and the police will produce DPIAs for each use of live facial recognition.

When it comes to the use of surveillance cameras, the police are required to have regard to the surveillance camera code. To support them in using that technology, they can draw on the guidance of the Surveillance Camera Commissioner and the Information Commissioner. Recognising concerns around the use of the new biometrics, we have set up a new oversight board that includes the Biometrics Commissioner, the Information Commissioner and the Surveillance Camera Commissioner. It will oversee new pilots and is reviewing police operational guidance for live facial recognition. There is a recognition in the system of the issues raised by Members, and mechanisms are in place.

However, I have been clear that the current arrangements are complex for both users and the public. We are therefore keen to simplify and extend the governance and oversight arrangements for biometrics. As I have said, we will update Parliament in the summer on that work. There is a limit to what I can say at the moment, but I hope that Members can take comfort from the fact that we recognise that their concerns are valid, and that, as I said, there is an active stream of work to try to simplify and extend the governance and oversight arrangements for biometrics, against a background of rapid change in the landscape.

The policy on custody images was established in the 2017 review, and allows people who have been arrested but not convicted to ask the police to remove their custody images. There is a strong presumption in favour of removal. It is critical that people are aware of their rights, and debates such as today’s, as well as the work of non-governmental organisations, help to increase that awareness.

The policy is public and set out on gov.uk, and is covered in the management of police information and authorised professional practice guidance. However, we cannot rely on that, and we need to go further. The police will tell all those who go into custody about the policy through information that they hand out. We will also review the policy, and use a current police audit of requests to inform our conclusions. I undertake that the views of the House will also be taken into account.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West and the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee spoke about automatic deletion of data for people who are not convicted. The Committee Chair will be aware that...
Baroness Williams of Trafford, who leads on the issue in the Home Office, has written to the Committee to give a further explanation of, frankly, the complexity underlying the issue. There is no debate about where we want to get to: we want to move to a system that is automatic. Her letter to the Committee, which I will share with the shadow Minister out of courtesy, sets out some of the complexities in delivering the timeline for which Members are reasonably asking.

As I understand it, the fundamental issue is that, unlike the arrangements for DNA and fingerprints, there is no single national system for custody images, with a unique identifier for every record. Many records have the appropriate identifier, enabling them to be linked to arrest records. However, there are several million on the police national database that cannot be linked easily, or at all. They would have to be manually reviewed or deleted in bulk, entailing many thousands of hours of work.

There is therefore an issue surrounding the different ways in which police databases work, and a fragmented landscape of local police force systems and different practices. It is genuinely complicated work. There is no quick fix, but I am satisfied that there is a determination to get to the end objective that we all want. In the meantime, we will work with the police to improve their procedures to better comply with the agreed policies. I will press the system harder on that, because obviously the current system is not satisfactory, or acceptable to me.

I will leave a few minutes for the hon. Member for Bristol North West to wind up, but I stress that biometrics, as the shadow Minister knows, play a fundamental role in many aspects of modern life and a vital role in the work of police, and have done for an extremely long time. We have a duty, as a Government and a Parliament, to support the protectors of the peace by ensuring that they can make use of new technologies in the most appropriate way. However, we must do our duty by the public we serve by ensuring that there are the right checks and balances in the process.

Ultimately, the public we serve and protect have to trust the process and continue to trust the police. We know the importance of trust in the modern age. Strikingly, the public we serve and represent continue to have high levels of trust in the police, whereas it has plummeted for many other traditional institutions. Trust in the police remains high, and it is important to me, and to anyone who will do my role in the future, that we maintain it. The inappropriate use of technology, or a lack of trust concerning how technologies are used in the future, is therefore a core challenge that the Home Office, under any colour of Administration, needs to take extremely seriously.

As the Home Secretary has said, we are not a surveillance state and have no intention of becoming one. That means that we must use new technologies in ways that are sensitive to their impact on privacy, and ensure that their use is proportionate and maintains the public trust that is at the heart of our policing model.

3.55 pm

**Darren Jones**: I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heely (Louise Haigh), for their contributions. I also welcome the interventions of the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), and the Minister’s responses.

It is clear from today’s debate that everyone, including the Minister and, by extension, the Home Office, agrees that we have some work to do, which is a good conclusion. I put it on the record that the Select Committee is interested in the actions being taken by the Scottish Government in the biometric data Bill that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned. We will keep a close eye on the work being done in Scotland, and think about what lessons we might learn in Westminster.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston said, if we have 29 million facial scans for one hit, we clearly need to have a better debate about the balance between impact and invasion of privacy. As many colleagues mentioned, the demand for a stronger regulatory system comes from not just police forces, commissioners, politicians and the public, but from the technology companies providing such solutions. They wrote to me in advance of the debate to say that they want to do the right thing, and would rather that there were a framework in which they can operate so that—no doubt for their own brand purposes—they are not pushing the envelope by delivering solutions that police forces and others may take too far.

I welcome the Minister’s commitment to privacy impact assessments. I am sure that we all welcome that confirmation. I understand that dealing with legacy IT systems is difficult; we have been talking about that on the Select Committee too. We encourage the Government not to put a sticking-plaster over old systems, but to invest in new ones, so that we are not just dealing with a legacy problem, but building something fit for the future. I look forward to reading the letter that the Minister referred to from Baroness Williams of Trafford.

The Minister said that it was good that in our system we can hold the Government to account and show our interest in such matters. It is clear from the debate, and from the Select Committee’s ongoing work, that we will continue to do so. We therefore look forward with anticipation to the further announcements that the Minister has committed to in the season of “summer”. Even though we do not quite know when that will start or end, we look forward to those announcements, and I thank him for his contribution.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered facial recognition and the biometrics strategy.

3.58 pm

*Sitting suspended.*
Jain Community: Contribution to the UK

[ANDREW ROBINDELL in the Chair]

4 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of the Jain community to the UK.

I have the privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on Jainism, and of having a large Jain community in my constituency. Jainism is a major and ancient religion of Indian origin that is recognised in the UK and globally, including by the United Nations, yet the cultural, economic, social and religious contribution that Jains make to our country has received little or no attention from public policy makers. That needs to change.

The largest proportion of people of the Jain faith live in India. There are estimated to be some 7 million Jains worldwide, but global census figures are likely to be a significant underestimation because many Jains are identified as Hindu—of which more anon. There is also confusion about the true number of Jains in the UK, but the UK is certainly a significant centre for Jainism, and studies indicate that it has almost 65,000 Jains—a figure far in excess of the 20,000 identified in the 2011 census, about which I will also say a little more later.

One key figure in the UK’s Jain community told me:

“We have always sought to integrate into the fabric of British society and wholeheartedly accept British values whilst retaining our distinct identity, religion and heritage.”

The UK has five major Jain religious sites: Hayes, Kenton, Leicester, Manchester and, of course, Potters Bar. The Potters Bar Jain temple, the largest example of Jain architecture in Europe, hosted His Royal Highness Prince Charles as recently as 2015.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I have shared many an Ahimsa Day—a glorious occasion—with my hon. Friend. He will be aware that even many people who do not know much about Jainism know a lot about Jain temples, which are the oldest religious buildings on Earth. Is he aware of the problem with getting visas for stonemasons to come to this country to assist with repairs and extensions to our Jain temples? Will he join me in giving the Minister a gentle nudge towards being a little more generous with such visas?

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention and for his work on the all-party group. When I visited the Potters Bar temple last June, its trustees were at pains to point out the difficulty of getting visas for stonemasons to come and help with the extension. I hope to come back to that issue and, as my hon. Friend suggests, press the Minister for help with getting the Home Office to be a little more reasonable.

The Potters Bar temple is magnificent. It was built with ancient techniques and crafts. No steel was used; 1,300 tonnes of Indian marble from Makrana were shipped to London after being beautifully carved by more than 450 specialist craftsmen. Almost 6,000 carved pieces were used, including for the amazing intricate ceiling of Indian marble, which was assembled like a giant jigsaw puzzle in just 15 months. That is why stonemasons need to be brought in from India, with the specialist expertise to which my hon. Friend rightly referred. I have also had the honour of visiting the Jain temple in Kenton, which is slightly nearer to my constituency and is attended by many Jains who live in Harrow West.

Jainism was founded in the 6th century BC. Jains trace their history through a succession of 24 Tirthamkara, or enlightened teachers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman always brings topical and important subjects to this Chamber, and I am usually here to support him. Does he agree that the 65,000 Jains who live and work in the UK, including in Northern Ireland, are more than welcome, and that their religious view must be respected at every level by every person in all the regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman makes an important intervention about the need for respect for the Jain community. He is right that there are Jains in Northern Ireland too; I am sure that they will have appreciated his intervention.

The first Tirthamkara was Raabhannya, who lived millions of years ago; the 24th was Lord Mahavira, who lived in about 500 BC in what is now Bihar in modern India and was a contemporary of the Buddha.

There are three major principles that most Jains recognise. The first is ahimsa, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) mentioned; it enshrines non-violence to all life in thought, word or deed. The second is aparigraha, which requires Jains to minimise their environmental impact through the non-acquisition of material goods; it discourages them from employment in sectors such as mining that can have a negative impact on the environment. The third principle, anekanta-vada, promotes tolerance through the acceptance of a multi-sided view of reality; it encourages the recognition that others have a right to their own point of view.

The principles of Jainism are believed to have inspired the idea of non-violent protest. Mahatma Gandhi was certainly aware of them; he spoke of his debt to Jainism. The principle of non-violence has led Jain culture to be vegetarian, and indeed often vegan, with fasting observed by many at key points in the year. In April and October, followers of Jainism mark Ayambil Oli, a biannual weekly festival of prayer and limited diet that celebrates discipline, austerity and self-control. In August and September, the Jain community celebrates Paryusan, an eight-day festival of fasting, prayer, repentance and forgiveness. Lord Mahavira’s birth is celebrated in April, and his final liberation is celebrated during Diwali in October and November.

I pay tribute to the Institute of Jainology, which provides the infrastructure to support Jain communities throughout the UK.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate to raise awareness of the Jain community, not only among parliamentarians but among the general public. Does he agree that Jains do not practise Jainism for themselves alone? They bring their message of vegetarianism, tolerance and equality to wider society, promoting unity among all communities and, above all, bringing their architecture...
to Europe, particularly in the west London area. Their communities in this country make a very positive contribution.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend sums up well the contribution made by Jainism. I celebrate the contribution of all Jains, but particularly those in north-west London.

The Institute of Jainology was established in 1983 and has been registered as a charity since 1986. It supports the more than 30 individual Jain communities that operate throughout the UK and brings them together as one movement. It is led by the excellent Nemubhai Chandaria OBE, and I pay tribute to all its trustees, including Mahesh Gosrani and Jaysukh Mehta, whom I believe may be watching this debate. From 2007 to 2012, the IOJ oversaw the successful JAINpedia project, which catalogued, digitised and displayed, albeit briefly, the Jain collections in major UK institutions such as the Victoria & Albert Museum and the British Library, attracting more than 30,000 visitors. Indeed, the UK’s collection of Jain works of scholarship, arts and literature is the most important outside India. Overseen by Meholol Sanghrajka MBE, who continues on the board of the IOJ with his father, Dr Harshad Sanghrajka, the JAINpedia collection has already had 5 million website hits.

Broadly speaking, there are two major strands in Jainism. The Digambara sect, whose monks do not wear any clothes, is found mainly, but not exclusively, in southern India. The Shvetambara sect, whose monks wear white clothes, is found mainly in northern India. It is fair to say that most Jains in the UK adhere to the Shvetambara tradition. Each of the two sects is divided into sub-sects, largely on the basis of people who pray in temples—the Murtipujak, meaning “idol worshipper”—and those who do not idol worship, but use halls to celebrate their faith, who are known as the Sthanaakavasi, which literally means “hall dweller”.

I have been honoured to chair the all-party parliamentary group on Jainism since its inception in 2016. With the purpose of gently raising the profile of Jainism in the UK, the APPG has had a number of successes. Last year the Jain community was finally given a place at the Cenotaph, alongside the other major world faiths and the royal family. Through the all-party parliamentary group, we have sought to celebrate the contribution of the royal family. This year the Jain community was finally given a place at the Cenotaph, alongside the other major world faiths and the royal family. Through the all-party parliamentary group, we have sought to celebrate the contribution of the royal family, particularly in the west London area. Their communities in this country make a very positive contribution.

Stephen Pound: On the subject of community service, the Jains whom I know are exemplary in their contribution to the community. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is somewhat sad that we do not have a single Jain Member of Parliament? I appreciate that Jains might be doing a huge amount of work in the community, but does he agree that perhaps it is time for a Jain MP to bring some of those glorious principles, which he has so beautifully enunciated, to this place? Would we not be a better Parliament for having a Jain MP?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We could be a better and more representative Parliament if there were a Jain MP, equally, there are no peers in the other place who are from the Jain faith. He raises a point that I wish to address: the role of political parties in changing the situation.

Some Jains have received recognition for their work in the UK through the honours system. They include Dr Vinod Kapashi, who runs Kenton temple with the support of others, Mrs Vilas Dhanani and Mrs Kusum Shah. Jain businesses have made a huge contribution to the UK economy across every sector, with leading businesses in education, transport, finance, hospitality, real estate and pharmaceuticals, to name just a few, all run by members of the community. An important example is Sigma Pharmaceuticals, led by Bharat Shah. It is the largest independent pharmaceutical wholesaler in the UK and was a national champion in the European Business Awards back in 2017. It is a family-run company with Jain principles at its heart, and for almost 40 years it has served independent pharmacies, dispensing to doctors and hospitals across the UK.

Another Jain-led business is Comline, which was established in 1991 and is a leading independent British supplier of aftermarket replacement vehicle parts. It is headquartered in Luton and has rapidly expanded to ensure efficient logistics from four key European hubs, which are located not only in the UK, but in Greece, Spain and Ireland. It has an impressive record in international trade, which unsurprisingly led to its receiving, among many other prestigious business awards, a Queen’s award for enterprise in international trade in 2016.

The Jain community has made huge contributions to charity in recent years by donating to a variety of causes in the UK and across the world, including tackling poverty, environmental issues, animal welfare and disaster relief. The community has also made donations—if the House will forgive my being parochial—to Earlsmead Primary School in my constituency, to help an excellent headteacher invest in the school’s library and other facilities.

The Jain community has a number of asks of Government and Parliament, which I will set out, and I look to the Minister to help us make progress. As I have said, the 2011 census did not get close to recording accurately the number of Jains. They had to self-identify on the census and will have to do so again on the printed return for 2021, unless the Government change course. Some 20% are expected to fill out a paper census form, and how to identify their religion is likely to lead to confusion for many Jains who do not have access to a computer.

Although it is true that Jains who complete their 2021 census return online will be able to tick a “Jain” box when they get to the question on religion, the procedure is not as simple as one might hope. They will have to tick the “Other” box and then type the letter “J” to bring up a list of religions starting with “J.” I fear that the failure simply to offer a “Jain” box in the religion question on the main census form will once again lead to significant under-representation of the true number of Jains in our country.

In 2011, many Jains who did not note their specific religion ticked the “Hindu” box. They did so because many Jain families in the UK have links with India, which was known as Hindustan before the British came along. For many Jains, being a Hindu is a geographical description—they are very comfortable with it—of where their family are from. Confusion and misunderstanding of people’s religion was therefore inevitable in 2011, and we risk the same mistake happening again. In my opinion, the 2021 census could easily offer a “Jain” box.
in the religion question. After all, Jainism is a major world religion and the seventh largest in the UK. As I have outlined, there is already evidence of significant under-reporting. Why will the Government not grant that simple request?

Using data from Jain temples, we know there are an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 Jains in the UK, but just 20,000 or so identified as such in the previous census. The Office for National Statistics has been lobbied by the all-party parliamentary group and representatives of the Jain community, but it is refusing to budge. I look to Ministers to give a stronger steer to the ONS to put that omission right.

There has been little recognition of Jainism by public broadcasters. It is a significant world faith, with significant places of worship in the UK, yet the BBC and other broadcasters do little to acknowledge that fact. I hope the Minister is willing to help facilitate a meeting between representatives of the BBC and the Institute of Jainology, to help put that omission right.

With inaccurate data, public services such as NHS trusts have more of an excuse for not planning appropriately for their local community. The need for a Jain crematorium is particularly urgent. The traditional custom in Jainism is to cremate the body within 48 minutes of death; after that, the body starts decomposing and breeds bacteria. The belief is that a delayed cremation would cause a great deal of violence and potentially spread disease. There are no Jain crematoriums in the UK, which means there is usually a one-week period between death and cremation while arrangements are made.

The Oshwal Association in Potters Bar has submitted a pre-plan to its local authority for a purpose-built crematorium at the Potters Bar temple, with a hall to accommodate large groups, adequate ritual and washing facilities, prayer rooms, a viewing room and adequate onsite parking. It has not yet received approval.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North pointed out in his first intervention, a particular challenge for Jain organisations is getting stonemasons to build, repair or extend their temples. It would be useful if the Minister could encourage the Home Office to be more sympathetic to requests from Jain communities for stonemasons who are expert in the traditions and practices of Jainism, usually from India, to be allowed into the UK temporarily to help with temple works. I took up the Oshwal Association’s need to secure visas for five such stonemasons to help extend the Potters Bar temple in time for its 50th anniversary celebrations. Initially, all five visa requests were refused. Following appeal, three were allowed and two were not. Similarly, Jain religious leaders visiting the UK temporarily often have difficulties. Again, a little more sympathy from the Home Office would be helpful.

There is a challenge for political parties. As my hon. Friend has said, there are no Jain Members of Parliament. The most senior elected Jains are currently Navin Shah, the excellent London Labour Assembly Member for Brent and Harrow, and Councillor Sachin Shah, previously leader of Harrow Council. There should be Jains in both Houses of Parliament. I look forward to all our political parties doing better at recruiting and mentoring Jain politicians and ensuring that more are elected.

Jainism is a remarkable religion, and its adherents in the UK are great British citizens. They deserve more recognition, and I hope the Minister will help us to deliver that.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing and introducing this debate on the contribution of the Jain community to the United Kingdom, and I welcome the contributions of other hon. Members.

I hope Jains across the country had a wonderful Mahavir Janma Kalyanak recently, as they came together to commemorate the birth of Lord Mahavir. I was pleased that the Prime Minister provided a message to the Jain community and sent her very best wishes as it came together to celebrate Mahavir Jayanti.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), to whom I have spoken about this subject. Although he could not be with us today, I know that he and the hon. Member for Harrow West are fully committed to serving not just the Jain community in Harrow, but all communities irrespective of belief and background. I commend them for their public duty in doing so.

I thank the members of the all-party parliamentary group on Jainism, ably led by the hon. Gentleman, for its work in helping to raise the profile of the Jain community in Parliament. In particular, I thank the Institute of Jainology and its chairman, Mr Nemubhai Chandaria OBE. Nemu and his team do a wonderful job representing the Jain community, including through their engagement with the Government, and especially my Department, to create and foster better understanding of Jainism.

We must of course pay tribute to the Jain community for its incredible contribution to British life, some of which we have heard about today. Jains from India and east Africa have successfully settled and made their home there, and they have made Britain their home. The Jain community comprises hard-working individuals and families, and is entrepreneurial in spirit. It is economically successful and continues to make a positive difference in our local communities. I know very well how faith groups and people from ethnic minorities can make our communities better, safer and stronger. Britain is stronger for her diversity. The Jains’ views of tolerance, respect and ahimsa help us to forge stronger and safer communities.

Lord Bourne, the Minister for Faith, recently attended the Mahavir Janma Kalyanak celebratory event last month in Portcullis House. He was honoured to have been asked to present community service awards to deserving members of the Jain community, including Dr Harshad Sanghrajka MBE, who received the ONEJain lifetime achievement award for his tireless work over 50 years supporting the Jain community; Mrs Shah for her charitable work in the UK and overseas; and Mrs Sheth for all that she has done over many years at the Navnat Vanik centre to manage the community catering as well as the weekly programmes for the elder members of the community. They have all gone above and beyond what is expected of them, all in the cause of helping their communities, voluntarily and without expectation or favour.
Charitable work and selfless service to the community are an important aspect of Jainism, whether in this country or anywhere else around the world. The Government are always delighted to receive nominations for honours from all faith communities to recognise their hard work. It was particularly satisfying to see the work of two Jains recognised in the most recent Queen’s new year’s honours list—Dr Vinod Kapashi, who received an OBE for services to Jainism, and Mr Ajay Gudka, who received an MBE for services to charity and to the community in Gujarat.

One topic I would particularly like to highlight is the work of the Jain community to promote organ donation and increase the number of donors across the Asian community. I applaud Jains and Hindus for bringing that important and often difficult subject to the fore. Their vital work will help to save countless lives.

On Jains’ engagement with Government, I am pleased to say my Department has an excellent relationship with the community and is happy to support it where we can. For example, my Department was instrumental in securing a place for a representative from the Jain community to attend the annual national memorial service at the Cenotaph for the first time last year. This was very fitting in view of its being the 100th anniversary of the Armistice. Lord Bourne and everyone in the Department were determined to see Britain’s diverse faith and belief groups appropriately represented, and it was a proud moment for us when that happened and Nemubhai took his rightful place.

One of Lord Bourne’s first engagements as the Minister for Faith was to visit the magnificent Oshwal temple in Potters Bar to see how the Jain community has fully embraced unity with nature. He was invited to tour the facilities and engage with the community.

I want to touch on the specific requests made by the hon. Member for Harrow West. He will know and, I hope, understand that the census falls under the purview of the Cabinet Office, so it is difficult for me to make policy on it. He has made representations on that point to the Cabinet Office and the ONS, and I know that the ONS has been engaging extensively with the Jain community ahead of the next census. It published its proposals in a White Paper at the end of last year. Some 55 different ethnic groups, including the Jain community, were asked to make representations, and I understand that the ONS has evaluated them according to some predetermined criteria. Currently, the recommendation, as the hon. Gentleman outlined, is that there will not be a specific category for Jains, but there will be the ability to use the online facility to search and enter oneself as a Jain. I appreciate that there is some concern about that. I ask the ONS and hon. Members to keep engaging with each other and the community to ensure that the records are good. It is no good undertaking that exercise if people are not aware that they can avail itself of that option and thereby enable us to collect the vital data that, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, is necessary to ensure the correct functioning of our services.

The second issue that the hon. Gentleman raised is the appropriate provision of crematoria. I am pleased to tell him that, just a few weeks ago, the Government announced that we will update the guidance on crematoria to ensure that the needs of different cultures and faiths in modern Britain are recognised and taken into account by local authorities. I will not go into all the details now, as the Government’s consultation response has been published and is online. The Minister for Faith has written to all local authorities asking them to be mindful of their obligations. The Government will consult on new guidance on the siting and design of crematoria, and will offer support to community groups interested in operating their own crematoria. I hope that is welcome, not just to the hon. Gentleman and the Jain community, but to different groups across the United Kingdom.

The two other issues that the hon. Gentleman raised are visas and the BBC. I would be delighted to see what we can do to get the meeting with the BBC that he asked for. Again, it is not the responsibility of my Department, but I would be happy to try to facilitate that meeting with representatives of this faith community. The hon. Members for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) made the same point about temporary workers who do not fit neatly into any existing visa categories. If there are specific cases, my Department and I would be delighted to take note of them if they write to us. Typically, we raise visa applications with the Home Office.

I again thank the hon. Member for Harrow West for securing this debate. He is right to put the contribution of the Jain community on the agenda in this place. It should be incredibly proud of its record, and he should be proud of his work in supporting it in this place. The Government feel very strongly that we can support the community. Together, we can live in a cohesive society with a shared idea of what Britain means to all of us. We can come together to celebrate and embrace that, and ensure that this country remains stronger for our diversity.

Question put and agreed to.
Future International Trade Opportunities

4.30 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered future international trade opportunities for the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

Leaving the European Union will provide us with a unique set of opportunities to develop trade policy. As we leave influences and restrictions put on us by the EU, we will be offered an exciting opportunity to compete more freely in global markets. That is one reason why I voted to leave the EU, and I know that was first and foremost in the minds of the 67% of my constituents in North Warwickshire and Bedworth who voted the same.

I recognise not only the opportunities but the challenges—we will face stiff competition globally—but we have to take the opportunity to ensure that the benefits of leaving the EU are fully recognised and, importantly, felt throughout the whole UK, not just in small pockets of it. I have discussed that with many businesses in my constituency and more widely in meetings here in Parliament, and I genuinely feel that we are ready and that the UK will be well placed to fulfil our huge potential.

As the Government know, according to International Monetary Fund projections, 90% of world growth is likely to come from outside the EU, so in future a greater proportion of UK trade will be with non-EU countries. That will be the case whether we are inside or outside the EU.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): One initiative that preceded the referendum was the appointment of trade envoys. That had nothing to do with Brexit, but it illustrates the point about the enormous opportunity, in particular in developing markets. I happen to be trade envoy to Nigeria. Will my hon. Friend join me in saying what a wonderful job that initiative does in helping to keep Nigeria. Will my hon. Friend join me in saying what a wonderful job that initiative does in helping to keep Nigeria.

Craig Tracey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the priorities of the Department for International Trade, in co-operation with the Department for International Development, is to look at how to replicate and increase the effects of the economic partnership agreements. There are with seven in place now, and we want to extend them to 31 other countries, including African and Caribbean ones. The opportunity is certainly out there, and I agree with him wholly.

We have made a good start. The Government’s stance in the White Paper on trade was encouraging:

“When we leave the EU we will regain our independent seat at the WTO. As an independent member and one of the largest economies in the world, we will be in a position to intensify our support for robust, free and open international trade rules which work for all, and to help to rebuild global momentum for trade liberalisation.”

We are already seeing encouraging signs. According to the OECD, at the end of last year the UK’s inward investment stock was an impressive $1.89 trillion, more than double Germany’s, which stood at $920 billion. The Government have already established working groups and high-level dialogues with a range of key trade partners, including the US, Australia, China, the Gulf Co-operation Council, India, Japan and New Zealand. I commend that approach, and I know that the Department plans and will work to extend that list, continuing to increase global trading relationships.

Analysis in a report by Minnesota’s Minneapolis Fed suggests that were we to reduce trade and investment barriers with the rest of the world by 5%, we would raise UK income by between £2.25 billion and £3.0 billion per year, even taking into account possible future restrictions on trade and investment with EU. Dr Graham Gudgin, an economist at the University of Cambridge’s Centre for Business Research, states:

“A smart WTO Brexit with well-designed trade, immigration, agricultural, fishing and regulatory policies would, far from being a ‘disaster’, have an excellent chance of delivering substantial long-term net benefits.”

Exciting opportunities across a wide range of sectors are open to Government as we move forward.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman must know that the most advanced example of trade liberalisation is actually the single market. Would it not therefore be better for Britain to remain a member of the single market?

Craig Tracey: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised that I disagree. One of the issues with the single market is freedom of movement, which was an issue in the referendum, and similarly the customs union ties our freedom of policy. Brexit offers us the chance to develop our own wider trade policies offers far more exciting possibilities to my constituents and to businesses around the country.

Speaking of my part of the country, it is good to see that, primarily as a result of Brexit, a new strategy is forming. Traditionally, parts of the midlands have tended to work separately on their trade policies, but through initiatives such as the Midlands Engine they are working much more closely together, with a great sense of teamwork and unity, and more joined-up thinking to deliver a wider, more focused outlook, which is to the benefit of the Midlands as a whole.

I raise my main topic today as one who was an insurance broker for more than 20 years and as chair of the all-party group for insurance and financial services. I will focus my comments on this sector, because insurance has the leading role in our future trade success. It is fundamental to economic improvement in every one of our constituencies, and is apparently one of the UK’s most successful export industries.

I say that insurance is important in all our constituencies because overall it employs about 300,000 people and, contrary to popular belief, two thirds of those jobs are outside London. The specialist London market itself employs about 52,000 people, but again, 17,000 of those jobs are outside London. In terms of premium income, the UK market is bigger than all the markets of its major competitors—Bermuda, Singapore and Zurich—combined. This country attracts large commercial business from more than 200 territories around the world, bringing to the UK about £65 billion of premium annually. On top of that, we have a reputation for product innovation to cover new types of risk. That is important as technology grows. Some of the products recently developed in London include cyber and data-breach insurance, stand-alone terrorist cover and natural catastrophe cover.
We cannot afford to be complacent about the industry, though. Research by the London Market Group, highlighted that premium coming from emerging markets into the UK has declined and that we face significant and growing competition from overseas, especially from markets in Bermuda, Singapore and Zurich, whose Governments support regulators that actively promote their industries and insurance markets. Meanwhile, our share of mature insurance and reinsurance markets stagnates. Asia is the highest growth market globally, and the region in which the UK lost the most ground in commercial insurance between 2013 and 2015, mainly to growing regional insurance hubs such as, again, Singapore, which had an annual growth rate of 4%.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The UK is the third biggest by value importer of food. If the United States wants access to that market, with lower quality food and hormone-impregnated beef for instance, does the hon. Gentleman think that is a permissible exchange for greater penetration for insurance and other financial products into the United States?

Craig Tracey: Although the US is one of our biggest import markets, I do not necessarily think so, because the Government have committed to maintaining high food standards. I am primarily talking about the insurance industry; I am sure the Minister can give some reassurance, but I think there is plenty of scope for us to grow imports from a whole range of countries around the world. The scope of where our imports come from seems to be very narrow.

Gareth Thomas: Research published in December by the Centre for European Reform suggests that if Britain leaves the single market, even with an ambitious future trade agreement with the European Union, exports of insurance and pension services from the UK would be almost 20% lower per year. Does the hon. Gentleman think that, however difficult it would be to present it to his constituents, staying in the single market might be the best way to protect a considerable number of insurance jobs in his constituency and elsewhere?

Craig Tracey: I do not. I have spoken to a wide range of stakeholders, including the London Market Group, Lloyd’s and the Association of British Insurers. I will make the point later that from their perspective, even free trade agreements are not necessarily the way forward.

Returning to the trend of the loss of global market share by UK commercial insurance, it is particularly important that the Government and industry consider the measures that can be introduced to reverse that trend, to encourage more trade and opportunities and, crucially, to promote the industry. It has long been argued in the insurance sector, and is something I have raised many times in this House, that our regulators should have a dual role—they should promote on the international stage. That would mirror what many of our competitors around the world already do, particularly in emerging areas.

We need domestic reform just to put us on a level footing with our competitors. UK regulators should have a regard for our international competitiveness. That means they should have to consider the impact of their decisions on the ability of UK-based financial services to compete on the international stage that we want to have access to. The sector has repeatedly made the point that progress does not necessarily rely on agreeing formal free trade agreements—they are not the be-all and end-all. The Government can make substantial progress now using some of the existing tools available to them such as financial and economic dialogues, which offer real benefits in shorter time frames. There would be an opportunity to turn them into bilateral agreements in future—the ABI highlighted that in relation to China and India in particular.

To remain internationally competitive, a future regulatory framework needs to be outcome-based. There is a view that trade should not be prevented by technical divergence between the UK and third countries if the outcome of the regulation is the same. So that we are not overtaken, it is important that Government, in partnership with organisations such as the LMG or the ABI, promote the unique benefit of access to our commercial insurance markets, given the significant economic and social benefits of expanding insurance provision and the growing protection gap challenge that many countries face.

I would like to draw the Minister’s attention to the London Makes it Possible campaign, run by the London Market Group. It is designed to promote London and the UK as the world’s pre-eminent insurance hub. It reminds countries around the world of the business range of risks we cover and is something that Government could get behind, to promote us. It has a fantastic website, where it is interesting to see some of the world-leading risks that we cover, and how our market is so different.

The expertise in this country enables us to place highly complex risks. The question is: where should we consider targeting? There are opportunities to grow the insurance trade in a number of developed and emerging markets. The ABI has identified 11 priority markets for future international trade, including China, India, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Switzerland and the United States. In addition, the LMG has identified its own target markets: the US again and the markets of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which have huge cyber-insurance opportunities. Latin America has one of the lowest insurance penetrations in the world, largely due to measures to shield those countries from international insurance markets. Although it is understandable, they may want to do that, those measures limit the pooling of risk and the insurance of large-scale natural disasters next to impossible. Importantly, that puts up costs for consumers and reduces take-up.

I visited the US last year with the British-American parliamentary group, to discuss financial services post-Brexit. We went to Washington and New York to see at first hand how important our insurance industry is there. The US continues to be the London Market Group’s single biggest source of business. In 2017, Lloyd’s underwriters wrote approximately £13.5 billion of US business, contributing to a total of approximately £20 billion of London Market Group premiums. The US spend on cyber-insurance alone is expected to reach $6.2 billion by 2020. It also faces a growing need to strengthen resilience against natural disaster and to bolster federal and state insurance programmes. The three hurricanes in 2017 caused more than $217 billion worth of damage, of which only $92 billion was covered by insurance.

The Government have already made important progress in negotiating and signing the UK-US covered agreement for reinsurance, which removes some collateral requirements and encourages regulatory dialogue between the UK
and US. That is a very welcome step to developing a new post-Brexit trading relationship between the two countries. The UK is ready to take advantage of those opportunities. World-leading insurance expertise is already based in this country so it will be a critical industry for us.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Leaving the European Union with the deal that the Prime Minister hopes to get would do 6% damage to GDP. Leaving with no deal would do 8% damage. An American trade agreement would boost GDP by about 0.2%, which is a thirtieth or a fortieth of that, depending on the scenario. That means we would need about 30 or 40 US-style agreements to make up for the economic damage that Brexit will do.

Craig Tracey: I believe it is not just about US agreements. I mentioned many other countries where there could be an opportunity for future agreements. It is interesting to hear that remark from a member of the SNP, which is looking to leave the UK, where 60% of Scotland’s exports come from.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Craig Tracey: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be able to intervene later, as I want to wind up my remarks.

I began by saying that leaving the EU brings a unique opportunity to the UK. In order to make the most of leaving, we need to rethink our strategy. The creation of our own UK regulatory framework can play a big part in that. I want to make it clear that the insurance industry is not looking for standards to be reduced or diluted. It is committed to maintaining standards, but it needs to be able to compete on the global stage. We should be under no illusions: regulation is a key factor in businesses deciding to invest here and to send their people here. It is really important that the Minister has at the forefront of his mind the need to retain proportionate regulation so we are not put at a disadvantage.

In March, following his spring statement, the Chancellor announced that the Government would review the UK’s future regulatory framework for financial services to “maintain world-leading financial services regulatory standards, remain open to international markets, and realise new trading opportunities.”

An international competitiveness duty should be a priority for that review. As I said, I think there are exciting opportunities ahead. Those of us who believe in the potential for our trading future were heartened by the International Trade Committee’s comment that we will “break down the barriers to trade wherever we find them.”—[Official Report, 16 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 43.]

That needs to be our mantra as we move forward. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about how we can continue our progress.

4.51 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I shall be brief. It will be a massive challenge to recover the trade that we shall lose. We currently negotiate as Team EU; standing alone as Britain, negotiating with other countries—particularly large ones, such as the United States and China—will be very difficult. There is a debate about climate change in the main Chamber at the moment. It seems to me that we shall have to trade further afield, which will harm our climate. I hope we see the introduction of carbon pricing to save the climate, but that will not be good for trade.

The hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) mentioned the WTO. There are 160 countries in the WTO, many of which have dictators and so on, and they will jointly make rules that govern us. It is a massive organisation, with a panel of unelected judges that will impose rules on our courts. We will not, for instance, be able to bring the railways and water companies into public ownership, as some in the Labour party would like to.

There will also be a great threat to our standards from things such as hormone-impregnated meat, chlorinated chicken and the sale of asbestos, all of which we see in the United States. The United States is likely to put pressure on us to allow the lowering of standards in exchange for access to digital and financial markets, for example.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I just note that when the International Trade Committee went to Japan and South Korea, the thing that sparked most concern among Japanese investors was the nationalisation of industries under a potential future Labour Government. That caused greater alarm than any discussion about Brexit. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that nationalisation may cause wider worry among international investors?

Geraint Davies: Ironically, the architect of the single market was largely Margaret Thatcher. As has been pointed out, it is one of the most perfect marketplaces in the world. She enabled the Japanese to platform into the European marketplace. Of course, they are all leaving now, because we are Brexiting. There is an EU-Japan deal, which we will be cut out of, and the car manufacturers are moving for that reason, too. Historically, the Japanese brought together the Government and industry in a way that allowed platforming, and used active government to help industry. That is what a Labour Government would want. The Japanese are not very happy about Brexit, and they are basically pulling out, which is a complete disaster for Britain.

On how we move ahead with the Trade Bill, I want assurances from the Minister about the scrutiny, accountability and transparency of future trade deals. It seems to me that there will be enormous pressure on standards, human rights, the environment, workers’ rights, consumer rights—everything. The Department is denying access even to the aims and objectives of trade negotiations, which are transparent in the United States and the EU. In fact, as I understand it, there is currently a freedom of information case in court because the Department is resisting providing access to that information. That is appalling. It bodes very badly, and I am very concerned.

I also want assurances from the Minister about investor-state dispute settlements, especially as fracking companies, for example, presumably will want to continue the appalling work that this Government have started. We are debating fracking to a certain extent today in the main Chamber. It is so destructive. The Minister may know that 5% of
the methane is leaked, and that methane is 85 times worse than carbon dioxide for global warming, making fracking worse than coal. Under investor-state dispute settlements, big fracking companies such as Lone Pine have fined the Canadian Government hundreds of millions of dollars for imposing a moratorium on fracking in Quebec. Will he therefore rule out investor-state dispute settlements?

Will the Minister ensure that Parliament can fully scrutinise and agree on the negotiating aims of future trade deals? Will he allow MPs to access some of the documentation, and to have debates and votes? We do not want, week after week, to be presented with a deal versus no deal choice in which the Government say, “Here’s the deal with Chile. If we don’t sign it, even though it’s not as good as the one we’ve got already, we won’t get anything. Come on,” and force through appalling documentation, and to have debates and votes? We do scrutinise and agree on the negotiating aims of future trade deals.

Quebec. Will he therefore rule out investor-state dispute settlements, big fracking companies such as Lone Pine have fined the Canadian Government hundreds of millions of dollars for imposing a moratorium on fracking in Quebec. Will he therefore rule out investor-state dispute settlements?

My desire has always been for us to strike a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, accept and then manage any trading friction that would cause, and offset costs through a competitive tax and regulatory regime and a broader range of new trading agreements that would—over time, admittedly—allow UK companies better to plug into growth markets or to enhance access to countries with which we already have strong trading relationships. Until that EU-UK relationship is determined, however, we have effectively put on ice the opportunities available with third countries, many of which are necessarily waiting to see the extent to which we are tied into EU structures to assess how deep a trading relationship they can have with us.

Looking to the future, it is important to underline that free trade agreements are not a panacea, but can none the less be used as a catalyst to deepen bilateral ties or simply to kick-start workstreams. We had a fascinating discussion at the International Trade Committee this morning about how Brexit has already had a positive impact simply through the creation of the Department for International Trade, which provides momentum and focus, and by sparking often overdue audits by UK companies of their agility, productivity and exposure to risk. The creation of a DIT database of trading opportunities for UK businesses has been enormously valuable, while the packaging of UK investment prospects in brands such as the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine has helped companies and trade bodies better articulate opportunities to prospective investors.

Companies have generally been impressed by the skills and energy of DIT teams in our embassies, but now they want those teams to enhance their regulatory knowledge, extend their networks to lobby more effectively and gear themselves to long-term relationships with key decision makers to act as experienced Sherpas to UK businesses. That will require lower churn of staff and a more extensive network of offices, particularly in different regions of China and states in America, where we can only achieve so much at federal level. The big prize would be in assisting mid-cap UK firms, where we currently fall short of the extensive assistance offered to the German Mittelstand by the powerful German chambers of commerce. We should also look to capitalise on and complement the existing networks of UK bodies such as the Corporation of London, which has developed city-to-city agreements with the likes of Tokyo and Shanghai on green finance, asset management and more.

With trade these days stifled much less by tariff than non-tariff barriers—admittedly the context is changing somewhat under the Trump Administration and the deteriorating relationship with China—future free trade area negotiations can be a focal point for, but need not hold up, wider country-to-country discussions on issues such as recognition between respective trade bodies of professional qualifications that would allow for the easier transfer of skilled staff; swifter, less costly visa regimes; research co-operation between universities; and easier transfer of skilled staff; swifter, less costly visa regimes; research co-operation between universities; and more. The midlands engine has helped companies and trade bodies to risk. The creation of a DIT database of trading opportunities for UK businesses has been enormously valuable, while the packaging of UK investment prospects in brands such as the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine has helped companies and trade bodies better articulate opportunities to prospective investors.

With trade these days stifled much less by tariff than non-tariff barriers—admittedly the context is changing somewhat under the Trump Administration and the deteriorating relationship with China—future free trade area negotiations can be a focal point for, but need not hold up, wider country-to-country discussions on issues such as recognition between respective trade bodies of professional qualifications that would allow for the easier transfer of skilled staff; swifter, less costly visa regimes; research co-operation between universities; and working groups on regulatory harmonisation, such that close ties with countries like the United States, Australia and Singapore could create momentum for a move towards global standards in key industries such as financial services, tech and the digital economy. Those are especially important issues for a services economy such as ours, and the coming together of...
powerhouses in financial services and life sciences such as the US and the UK could have a tremendous impact on the setting of those standards.

Should we ever get to the point where we can negotiate new FTAs, we ought to have completed an analysis of the errors made in the Brexit and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations. I recommend, and I know the Minister agrees, that we ensure that Parliament has scoped out and agreed to a broad mandate for any new FTA and is able to access information about ongoing negotiations via a new, confidential parliamentary committee that could access relevant paperwork, trade expertise and legal advice.

Meanwhile, we should seek immediately to knock on the head unhelpful canards about chlorinated chicken or US healthcare companies being able to sue the NHS. Modern bilateral agreements are flexible and can permit carve-outs for sensitive areas of trade. The FTA between China and Australia, for instance, does not allow access to certain aspects of Australia’s pharmaceutical and healthcare system, while investor dispute settlement mechanisms are absent from large parts of the Canadian and American trading relationship. Ultimately, however, in being able to determine our own trade policy, we can be compelled neither to enter nor remain in any FTA or investment treaty that we do not believe to be in our interests, subject to notice.

There is so much more to say on this subject, but other Members wish to speak. Finally, I hope that this realignment of UK trading prospects is not hindered by the signing of a substandard withdrawal agreement that places us either implicitly or explicitly in a customs union, and that this debate marks the start of a more positive, creative discussion about the new trajectory on which we can place our nation in the years ahead. Ours is the world’s fifth-largest economy, strong in so many expanding areas such as services, science and digital technology, and able to attract huge amounts of investment despite the uncertainty that Parliament has created over Brexit. With skill, verve and leadership, the UK can eventually emerge a nimbler, more dynamic economy, not only better positioned to plug into growth markets but better able to deliver tangible benefits to the people and businesses we represent.

5.3 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on what so far has been an interesting debate. I gently remind the House of the promise that the International Trade Secretary made to have signed some 43 trade deals by the end of March 2019. Not surprisingly, that has not been achieved, and we are some way from seeing those 40 so-called roll-over EU trade agreements signed. That is an indication of the complexity of trade. While, as the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) alluded to, many things can affect future trading opportunities for British businesses, the instability of not having sorted out proper trade agreements with both the European Union and other key markets is likely to inhibit the international trading opportunities for British businesses.

I raise in particular concerns about trade in services, because the vast majority of the jobs done by my constituents that directly involve international trade are related to services. The few bits of detailed thinking from independent trade experts about the impact of Brexit on trade in services highlight the huge significance of such trade between the UK and the EU, and therefore what is at risk, in terms of scale, for the UK economy from any inhibitions of trade in services.

In 2017, according to the Centre for European Reform, services accounted for some 45% of total UK exports, or almost £300 billion. The EU received 40% of those exports, the highest proportion of any UK trading partner. Research by the Centre for European Reform suggests that if Britain leaves the single market and trades services under the provisions of an ambitious free trade agreement, on an annual basis UK exports to the EU of financial services will none the less be 60% lower, UK exports of insurance and pension services will be almost 20% lower, and exports of other business services, including law, accountancy and professional services, will be 10% lower. Those are all sectors in which Britain has a significant comparative advantage, so jobs, investment and tax revenues are all at risk in the case of withdrawal from the single market.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way on that point, which leads me to the point raised by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). The stats he just gave lead to the 6% damage there would be to GDP. When I pointed out that we would need 30 or 40 America-style agreements, he said we can find more countries and more deals. The only problem is that the USA is a quarter of the world’s GDP, so we would need seven to 10 planets to make up for the damage the UK is inflicting on itself with Brexit.

Gareth Thomas: I agree; the hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Without dwelling on that point, the CER report helpfully points out that it is significantly more difficult to open services markets than goods markets to trade, because many barriers to trade are regulatory in nature. The quality and safety of a service is difficult to decide at the border.

As I pointed out in my intervention on the hon. Member for North Warwickshire, no group of countries has gone further than the European Union in making it easier to sell services produced in one country in another in a bloc, yet still barriers remain. Therefore, pulling out of the single market and negotiating a free trade agreement, however ambitious it ultimately is, would inevitably throw up new barriers to trade, particularly if we withdraw from the EU’s collective rulebook, shared institutions and cross-border enforcement regimes, as it appears the Prime Minister wants. Some of the impact of withdrawal from the single market for services could be offset with, for example, significant mutual recognition of qualifications and—more controversially—the temporary movement of people.

It is not fashionable to worry about the future of financial services—the case for further regulatory reform of the industry can easily be made—but it remains one of the few world-class industries we have in the UK, and it is clearly set to be damaged significantly, putting jobs in my constituency at risk. For that reason, I urge the House to vote for us to stay in the single market as part of a soft Brexit deal, put back to the British people in a public vote with the option, nevertheless, to remain in the EU.
Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): I call Faisal Rashid. However, I ask the hon. Gentleman to keep his remarks fairly short as we are running out of time for the winding-up speeches.

5.9 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Rosindell. It is great to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for securing this important debate. I will try to be as brief as possible.

International trade could not be more integral to both the history and the future of this country. Britain’s prosperity has always been tied to how we do business with the rest of the world. Our trading relationships determine our living standards, jobs, and access to resources. It is high time that Members paused to reflect on the great trading potential this country could have under the right political leadership. Trade is not only a critical source of wealth creation; when tied to an open, rule-based system trade can also be a great driver of human rights and social justice. Now, in an era when unilateralism and protectionism is on the rise, it is more important than ever that we reflect, reject self-imposed isolation and explore fresh opportunities for UK businesses overseas.

Britain’s international trading practices can reflect our core values of mutual respect and shared prosperity, not nor...
The Swiss and Norway continuity agreements demonstrate what happens when negotiations take place from a position of weakness. In the EU-US negotiations we have seen the US adamant that agriculture would be included in any deal, but the EU trade commissioner Cecilia Malmström told the US trade representative that they could not negotiate on agriculture. She has been quoted as saying:

“We have made very clear agriculture will not be included.”

She can do that from a position of strength. My great concern is that the UK is negotiating from a position of profound weakness, as evidenced by the failure of the continuity agreements, meaning that we may well face all the downsides of the US and others seeking an agricultural deal that will weaken food, hygiene and environmental standards. How does the Minister respond to that? It would be useful to know.

I finish by making a key point that was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar when he talked about export figures. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research suggested that any Brexit would see a loss of around 20% in total UK trade. Cutting a deal with the main English-speaking countries would see an increase of 2% to 3% and cutting a deal with the BRIC countries would see an increase of 2% to 3%. If we lose 20% of our total trade, the best we can do with the biggest economies in the world is to claw back maybe 5% or 6%. It is a pretty bad starting point. How does the Minister intend to ensure that there is a real focus on filling the gap and making sure that no part of the country, no part of the economy and no workforce is sacrificed on the altar of Brexit ideology?

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): In congratulating the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing the debate, I call on the Minister to deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Dundee West (Stewart Hosie). What the hon. Member for North Warwickshire mentioned the importance of insurance, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) mentioned the other service parts of the economy that are crucial to his constituents. Trade in services is vital to our economy. The hon. Member for North Warwickshire mentioned the importance of insurance, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) mentioned the other service parts of the economy that are crucial to his constituents. Trade in services represents the majority of the economy, driving jobs and prosperity to Britain, and it will be significantly impacted by the nature of our future relationship with the EU. Having a strong relationship with the internal market of the EU is therefore essential.

Turning to the Government’s failure to make progress in negotiating replacements for the 43 agreements with 70 or so countries to which we are party through our membership of the EU, at the last count we were told that four deals were off track, 19 were significantly off track, four were impossible to complete and two were not even being negotiated. Perhaps the Minister can update us. It is no good the Government’s saying we should have voted for the Prime Minister’s deal. The fact that the details of the future relationship with the EU will be negotiated only after we have left means that what is on offer is blind Brexit. That is why the Opposition cannot support the current deal.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): Is it the view of the Labour party that we should have disregarded the EU’s statement that, under its laws, it did not think it was possible to negotiate the future partnership until after we had left?

Bill Esterson: That is another debate. I will stick to the topic of international trade and future arrangements.

As any business person knows, you look after existing relationships first and maximise them—something I learned through running a business for 15 years. The same principle applies to countries, which is why a close relationship with our biggest trading partner is essential. Meanwhile, there is no sign of the Trade Bill returning from the Lords, and Government plans to implement zero tariffs unilaterally really would create a disincentive for countries to negotiate a trade deal with us, because we would be giving away the shop before negotiations started and would have nothing to offer in return for a trade deal.

I want to give the Minister plenty of time to respond, so in the time remaining I will speak about the low-carbon economy and the need to address the climate emergency. This Government’s record in international trade is a cause for concern in relation to the low-carbon economy: £2.362 billion of UK export finance over the past five years has been spent on exports to low and middle-income countries in the energy sector relating to fossil fuels, with just £1 million invested in the renewables sector. If we are serious about tackling climate change, those figures need to be completely reversed, so it is disappointing that after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s report last autumn, this Government announced that they were considering support for a Bahrain oil refinery.

We have many success stories in renewable energy; we are often world leaders in technology—Windhoist, for example, sells wind turbines to Taiwan and Australia—but for other companies there is only frustration. Award-winning exporter Nova Innovation exports tidal energy equipment. Its chief executive officer, Simon Forrest, says:

“At the moment, we hold the trump cards in marine power—the resource is abundant, it’s completely predictable, we have a global lead and we have got the supply chain. What we don’t have is revenue support to take us to market. That’s what Denmark did with wind, and we didn’t. Having built up this lead, we will lose it to Canada or Japan.”

We cannot afford to let that happen in sectors such as tidal energy. We can be leaders in the low-carbon economy. Meeting the challenge of the climate emergency can deliver future prosperity through a proper industrial and international trade strategy in renewables, not fossil fuels. It is time to develop the future, not the past.
5.23 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for introducing this important debate, and thank hon. Members from across the House for the many informed contributions, which I will return to before I have finished.

This debate is important because trade really matters to the UK. At £634 billion last year—equivalent to 30% of GDP—exports are not some separate add-on to our economy; they are integral to it. That is before we even get to our record £1.3 trillion of foreign direct investment, which last year alone created 76,000 new jobs, or the benefit of imports in giving us a wider choice of more affordable goods.

That is not the high-water mark, however: there are more opportunities to come. The patterns of world trade are shifting. We are entering a Pacific century after four Atlantic ones. The latest World Bank figures show China adding an economy the size of Portugal’s to its GDP ever four months—a pretty astonishing statistic. The UK will be one of the few developed countries to stay in the top 10. We can take advantage of that shift if we act now. That is why the Government have consulted on new trade agreements with the USA, Australia and New Zealand, and on potential accession to the catchily named Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, a cross-Pacific agreement that covers 11 nations and already 13% of the world’s GDP, including many of the growing markets to which my hon. Friend referred in his speech.

The nature of trade is also shifting. McKinsey estimates that digital trade flows contribute more to the world economy than the entire trade in goods. Services are becoming ever more international. The UK is well placed to take advantage of those trends, too. We have a flourishing digital sector, with Europe’s largest e-commerce market. We are the second largest service exporter and, as my hon. Friend mentioned, we have particular strengths in areas such as insurance, where Lloyd’s is the world leader in maritime risk and specialist insurance and reinsurance.

That is why, in December, we submitted our WTO service schedules, to give continuity for our service exporters, and why, once we represent ourselves at the World Trade Organisation, we will be pushing for further liberalisation and further reform within the rules-based, consent-based, multilateral framework it provides. That also means looking beyond traditional trade agreements, which is why my Department has secured market access for everything from energy trading in China, to beef and lamb in Japan.

My hon. Friend mentioned a report by the London Market Group. As a specific response to that report, we have set up a new workstream with LMG to promote insurers in Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries. I saw at that first hand when I visited Singapore not long ago and met Prudential, which is working with Babylon. Amazingly, Prudential has a subsidiary in Malaysia that is nearly 100 years old and another in Singapore that is 85 years old. It has subsidiaries in Vietnam and in Indonesia and business throughout the ASEAN region, and I was very impressed by its attitude. It understood the power of data and of digital to allow it to insure more properly.

Colleagues have raised a number of issues, and I would like to deal with one or two of those. We have published a Command Paper on scrutiny and have made it absolutely clear that we wish to be transparent in how trade deals are dealt with in the House of Commons. The House of Commons, and indeed the House of Lords, should have full and proper scrutiny and we are pursuing those models. We are coming to a conclusion about the way in which we wish to do that and no doubt we will in due course negotiate with various parties in the House.

The hon. Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) both noted that services are at the centre of the UK’s agenda. Barriers to trade in services are generally behind the border, and with free trade agreements we deal with those issues through joint economic forums and multilateral interactions.

An independent trade policy is an opportunity for the UK. I understand the issue of the weight of 600 million people, but that also means that our trade policy is compromised. It is compromised in a good way—do not get me wrong—but it is designed to fit 28 nations. With a UK-based trade policy, we, with the sixth largest economy—or the fifth largest, depending on how it is measured—will have a tailored free-trade policy, which will be for the UK alone, and there will plainly be advantages in that.

The hon. Members for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), for Harrow West and for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) made plain that what they want is no Brexit at all. We all have starting points on that question. I would describe myself as a democrat first and a remainer second, and the British people, while they did not speak with an absolutely unified voice on this issue, have told us that we should leave the EU. The hon. Members’ proposition simply does not deliver Brexit.

On continuity agreements, most Members will agree that there are all sorts of different motivations among our partners.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the Minister give way?

George Hollingbery: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the clock, he will see that I cannot give way. Actually, rather than finishing my speech, I ought to give my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire space to sum up. I thank all hon. Members.

5.29 pm

Craig Tracey: I thank all hon. Members for taking part. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) that we need a lot more time to debate the issue. I thank everybody for their contributions and the Minister for his encouraging response. It is probably no surprise that I do not share the Opposition’s negativity about our ability to succeed outside the EU; I look forward to our soon getting the opportunity to put that into action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered future international trade opportunities for the UK.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 May 2019

[Steve McCabe in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Working at Height: Safety

1.30 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered preventing serious injury and fatalities while working at height.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I pay tribute to everyone who contributed to the all-party parliamentary group on working at height report, which we published just a few months ago. The acknowledgments on the back pages list the organisations in the sector that brought their expertise to bear.

A 1970s public information film told us: 

“The effects of gravity can be grave.”

We all have a stake in our constituents being safe while working at height, including the workers in this very building, which is shrouded in scaffolding, including just outside the doors of Westminster Hall.

Last year, the APPG on working at height undertook an inquiry to understand the reasons why falls from height occur, and to examine their consequences for individuals and their families. It published a report in February, “Staying Alive: Preventing Serious Injury and Fatalities while Working at Height”, which makes a number of recommendations that we hope will help to create a safer environment for the millions of people who work at height in the UK every day.

More than 60 respondents to the APPG took the time to share their experience and suggest ways to improve and build on the current guidelines and legislation. Working at height is not the sole preserve of those we might automatically think of, namely people in the construction sector. We must also consider the work of window cleaners, sole traders, small businesses, people in the oil and gas sector, farmers and agricultural workers, and many other professions besides. The evidence gathering helped us to shape the report’s recommendations and gave us a valuable insight into the challenges faced by those various sectors. The fantastic response from the public and industry highlighted the importance of this issue and the desire to see improvements across all sectors involved in working at height. I pay particular tribute to the Access Industry Forum, and to Peter Bennett OBE of the Prefabricated Access Suppliers’ and Manufacturers’ Association and the No Falls Foundation, which are based in my constituency and forged the idea of setting up the APPG.

At the report launch, we were humbled to hear from Paul Blanchard, who had a fall in 2010 when aged 55. After falling from a roof, he broke his back and 18 ribs, suffered severe head injuries and punctured a lung. He subsequently spent three months in a coma in hospital.

His family were told twice that he might not survive, and that if he were to survive he would likely have significant brain damage. Miraculously, he pulled through, but was left with no sense of smell and damaged hearing, and was paralysed from the chest down. At the launch, he spoke movingly about how he is still coming to terms with the changes to his life and that of his family. His account is a stark reminder that a fleeting lapse in concentration can have devastating, lifelong consequences. That must be our main motivation to do all we can to improve the regulatory environment and the rules and guidelines. No one should ever not return home from work as a result of a fall from height.

Although we have a good record in the UK, 35 families last year lost a loved one due to a fall from height. I am sure you will agree, Mr McCabe, that that is 35 too many. The fantastic “Get a Grip” safety campaign, which was launched recently by the Ladder Association and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, aims to raise awareness of the importance of using ladders and step-ladders safely, both at work and at home, in an attempt to reduce accidents. The campaign features a short film comprising an interview with Abbi Taylor, whose father, Jason Anker, who also gave evidence to us, was paralysed after a fall from height when she was only three years old. Abbi talks candidly about the profound effects that her father’s accident had on her. She speaks about how he was not able to walk her down the aisle at her wedding or babysit his young granddaughter. It is an incredibly powerful message and helps to convey the hugely important message that there can be devastating, real-life consequences to using ladders, or working at height in any capacity, if proper precautions are not taken. I recommend Abbi’s video to everyone here, and would be happy to share the details if anyone is interested.

I would like to see more of that type of campaign, as we do not have the public information broadcasting that we used to have. I am keen for the APPG to explore and be more involved in that. As Dr Karen McDonnell, occupational safety and health policy adviser for ROSPA, said recently:

“We are aware people have deadlines and other pressures, but by cutting corners you’re putting yourself in harm’s way. By making people think about what could happen to family and friends in the event of a fall, we can get people to think twice about their safety.”

I could not agree more. It is one thing to tell people about rules and guidelines, but quite another to tell them of the life-changing impacts that carelessness can bring about. We all see people working on buildings and ladders doing those kinds of things, and we sometimes wonder why people have done what they have done. Often, it is due to a lapse of concentration or because someone has cut a corner.

To tackle some of these issues, the APPG has made four recommendations and highlighted two areas where we want to consult further. First, we want to introduce enhanced reporting through the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995— RIDDOR—which would at a minimum record the scale of a fall, the method used and the circumstances surrounding the fall. It would also be useful to link up with NHS data, which could provide further details.

Previously, data was collected through the home accident surveillance system and the leisure accident surveillance system, but that ended in 2003, leaving a significant data gap.
Secondly, we recommend the setting up of an independent reporting body to allow confidential, enhanced and digital reporting of near misses and accidents that do not fall under RIDDOR reporting. That could then be shared with the Government and industry, to inform health and safety policy. We heard evidence from the Confidential Hazardous Incident Reporting Programme charitable trust, the UK Confidential Reporting Programme for Aviation and Maritime, and Confidential Reporting on Structural Safety, all of which have seen the benefit of such a reporting scheme. It would be particularly useful in addressing emerging new risks in newer areas of industry and construction. Things are changing, and buildings look very different. The occasions on which people may have to work at height, such as music festivals, are developing all the time, and we must consider how accidents can be reported.

The first two proposals attracted broad agreement from those who responded to the APPG’s inquiry. There is concern that safety improvements are hindered by a lack of empirical data, knowledge and understanding of the root causes of falls from height. The issue is compounded by a cultural obstacle when it comes to supporting people to report unsafe practices. The recommendation concerning improved reporting suggests a change to existing systems of data collection, as opposed to building something from scratch. Free-text boxes and not asking the right questions hamper the learning that can be taken from incidents. The Minister will be glad to hear that stakeholders believe that making those improvements would have little financial burden on the Government. It would be a quick win and would improve data quality and accuracy almost overnight. For those reasons, I would be grateful if the Minister gave the proposal serious consideration.

Our third recommendation concerns extending the “Working Well Together—Working Well at Height” safety campaign to a wider audience outside construction. There are now many industries that involve work at height that ought to be considered, and it appears that stakeholders would welcome such an initiative. The Health and Safety Executive analysed 150 falls from height that it investigated in the food and drink industry over three years. Its website indicates that 40% of workers fell from ladders; 17% from vehicles or forklifts; 10% from machinery or plant; 10% from platforms; 8% from stairs; 7% from roofs or false ceilings; 4% from scaffolds and gantries; and 4% from warehouse racking. A range of incidents can occur. Workplaces are increasingly complex, and workers are perhaps not as prepared as they could be due to the nature of work, including temporary and zero-hours contracts. Workers in those environments need to be protected wherever they are.

The APPG has suggested changes that draw on best practice or existing mechanisms. That is why our fourth recommendation is that the Scottish fatal accident inquiry process should be extended to all parts of the UK. In Scotland, Ministers are required under section 29 of the Inquiries into Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths etc. (Scotland) Act 2016 to report on fatalities. FAIs are mandatory for deaths occurring in the workplace, and the outcomes are publicly available online. Extending that to all parts of the UK would go some way to ensuring that all fatalities in the workplace, including those as a result of a fall from height, are properly and thoroughly investigated and reported, and that recommendations for change are made.

The APPG wants to look further at a digital technology strategy, including a new tax relief to help small, micro and sole traders to invest in new technology. That is more an issue for the Treasury, rather than the Minister, but we think it is important. We heard from the City of London Corporation about its initiative to improve understanding of working at height among facilities management companies, and from construction giant Balfour Beatty about its use of drone technology to carry out bridge inspections, cutting the risk for workers at height. Technology offers great potential and it should be available not just to wealthy companies but as widely as possible, including to small businesses and lone workers so that they can avoid putting themselves at risk. This is also a good time for Government to instigate a major review of work-at-height culture, which should include investigating the suitability of legally binding financial penalties in health and safety. Those funds could go towards raising awareness.

I have been contacted by people interested in preventing injury from dropped objects, for which the data is also quite sketchy. The HSE collects information on those struck by moving objects, which accounted for 13% of deaths and 10% of injuries, but there is no sense of exactly which objects were moving, in what manner, how they caused harm or what happened. Information suggests that dropped objects are in the top 10 causes of injury in the oil and gas industry alone. That requires much more investigation, and the APPG intends to look into it further.

Work is being carried out in the United States, with the ANSI/ISEA 121 dropped object prevention solutions standard, and in Aberdeen with the dropped objects prevention scheme, or DROPS. I encourage the Minister to investigate whether those schemes could enhance the HSE’s work.

I am sorry to disappoint hon. Members who came to the debate hoping for a wee break from Brexit, but it is important to touch briefly on the potential impact that leaving the European Union may have on this area of policy, which we must bear in mind when it comes to people’s safety. In a recent survey, 97% of businesses asked by EEF said that they wanted no immediate change to regulations as and when the UK leaves the EU. We must not sacrifice red tape, because it provides a safety net.

The UK Government introduced the Health and Safety (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which are designed to ensure that all EU-derived protections are fully incorporated into UK law. The message from the APPG is clear: Ministers must ensure that no individual who works at height is any less safe after Brexit. I hope the Minister will make a commitment on that.

Before I conclude my remarks, I thank the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), who is an excellent member of the APPG and is very committed to the issue. I am glad to see him here. I am sure that if it were not for today’s local elections, the debate would have a much wider attendance.

Although I acknowledge that the UK has some of the lowest workplace fatality and serious injury rates of any country in the European Union, the latest data—
published last year by the Health and Safety Executive—shows that, averaged over the past five years, 26% of deaths at work happen as a result of a fall from height, which is by far the leading cause. In 2017-18, 8% of workplace injuries were the result of a fall from height—those injuries can be very serious. Many of those deaths and injuries are preventable, and that is a tragedy. We in this place must therefore do everything in our power to minimise risk and protect individuals as much as possible.

One fatality at work is one too many.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I support the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) in commending the APPG report to the Minister and to the House as a whole. I have played a small part in the group, but was able to attend a number of sessions and helped to sign off the report’s recommendations. I have done so because it is self-evident and important that we must try to reduce still further the number of deaths and injuries caused by falls from height.

My first memory of my dad was visiting him in hospital after he had suffered an industrial injury and was off work for six months. It is important to remember that it is not just the individual who is affected by an injury at work, but their family, as the hon. Lady said. Although my dad was not injured by a fall from height, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Work at Height Regulations 2005, which were both passed by a Labour Government, are critical pieces of legislation. They ensure that those who work at height, either for big businesses or when self-employed, come home safe, contribute at work safely and are free from injury or—in some cases, sadly—death, as a result of their efforts at work.

We have a responsibility not only through business, central Government regulation and legislation passed by this House, but through the exploitation and promotion of good practice, to ensure that we do all we can to make that happen. The report shows that in the last year for which we have figures, 18% of people who died at work died as the result of a fall from height, so inroads the Government make in tackling that challenge will help to reduce the overall number of deaths at work. Our figures are very good compared with other European countries, partly because of the legislation passed to date, but as the hon. Lady said, the report mentions some important ways we can not only build on the regulations that place duties on employers, self-employed people and any individuals who contract people to work at height, including building owners, facility managers and householders, but rise to the challenges set out in the report. I look forward to hearing what the Minister thinks the challenges will be.

The hon. Lady mentioned the importance of reporting. There is now a reporting mechanism, but the APPG’s report asks for enhanced reporting to examine still further, and at a minimum, the scale of the fall, the methods used and the circumstances—to get as much information as possible about the fall, so that we can learn and help to prevent future injuries. Is the Minister happy with the current level of reporting and with the demands put on it? Is there scope to improve reporting, as the hon. Lady and the report have requested? If so, as Minister, he has a duty to improve reporting and prevent future injuries and deaths.

The hon. Lady mentioned that our report asks for an independent body to ensure that we allow confidential, enhanced digital reporting of near misses. Reporting a number of near misses that could have resulted in death or serious injury is crucial to oblige good practice and to ensure that we reduce the potential danger and the threat of poor behaviour. What is the Minister’s view on an independent body? Does he think it worthwhile or would it be an additional burden on business? I do not think it would be, but I would like some clarity on that, because it is important that we have that level of support.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Working Well Together campaign and the Working Well at Height safety campaign for industries outside the construction sector. Many businesses regard that as a critical part of their work for training, assessments and so on. For some businesses, however, working at height might be occasional and not central to their daily work. What is the Minister’s view on the Working Well Together Campaign? Can it be improved? He has the ability to make changes if his good team of officials assess them and support him in doing so.

The hon. Lady mentioned Scotland’s fatal accident inquiry process, and I think that there is merit in that. If I get nothing else from the Minister today, I would welcome confirmation of whether he has even looked at Scotland’s fatal accident inquiry process. If he has, what is his assessment of it? I am not asking him today to expand it; I am just asking whether he has looked at it. Have his officials looked at it? Will he be reviewing it? Will he bring to the table an assessment of whether lessons from Scotland could improve safety at work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I want to help the right hon. Gentleman. Perfectly legitimately, he is making, as did the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), a number of particular points. It may also help colleagues who have yet to speak if I make this brief point in an intervention. Clearly, this matter requires the Health and Safety Executive to report back to the Government on it. The Government would rightly be criticised if they were too definitive without first receiving a specific response from the HSE. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I will attempt, within the bounds of what I am able to say, to answer the points raised by the hon. Lady and by him, but obviously we are subject to the formal response by the HSE.

David Hanson: I am grateful to the Minister for putting that on the record. He knows that I acknowledge that relationship, but the key point is that, as the Minister, he can commission work, ask for reviews and, if he has not already, ask the Health and Safety Executive to look at the Scotland fatal accident inquiry process to assess whether any improvements have been made.

Finally, the report also suggests a review of working-at-height culture. Potentially, with the great modern technology that we have, that includes mechanisms that the hon. Member for Glasgow Central mentioned, such as drones and other activities. We do not wish to put people out of work, but the threats and dangers of certain aspects of work can be minimised by advancing technology. Again, the Minister has the overview to work with the Health and Safety Executive, that great Labour Government invention, to reduce the number of deaths and injuries at work.
I support what the hon. Lady said, and I want to put on record my support from the Labour Back Benches for the recommendations. I hope that our discussions over 18 months to two years will result in some changes that prevent injury and loss of life, and give some people the opportunity to go back to work the following day, contributing to our economy without threat to their life or their family's future.

1.50 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. When I saw your good self and the Minister sat there, I thought that I was in a Select Committee. I was ready to ask him impertinent questions—

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman is never impertinent.

Chris Stephens: I will perhaps have to quote the Minister’s comment back at him during a future inquiry. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), on all her work on working at height, which is particularly prevalent in sectors such as construction. I come from a trade union background and was a Unison activist in Glasgow, and we were very aware of such issues, in particular those around whether workers should get additional payments for the context in which they work—at height, for example—and so on. We should remember that in some sectors of the economy, blacklisting by employers was prevalent, often of individuals who expressed the health and safety concerns of workers. That is a real problem and it is still happening. Blacklisting is illegal, but some evidence presented to the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs last year suggested that the practice continues. I refer Members to the early-day motion in my name that calls for a public inquiry into blacklisting.

Every fall from height can have life-altering consequences for workers and their families. The working-at-height culture needs to improve, as the APPG report demonstrates clearly, but sadly the issue does not yet appear to be at the top of decision-making agendas. Lack of data prevents us from understanding the causes of falls from height, which is compounded by a cultural obstacle to supporting people to report unsafe practices.

This excellent report looks at the issues that the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) talked about, in particular the four primary recommendations: the enhanced reporting system; the appointment of an independent body to allow confidential, enhanced and digital reporting of all near-misses, to be shared with Government and industry to inform health and safety policy; the extension of the Working Well Together programme; and the extension of the Scotland fatal accident inquiry process to other parts of the United Kingdom.

Another concern to share is that, under the coalition Government, the HSE suffered cuts and job losses. Many of us from a trade union background and those Members in Parliament at the time had real concerns about the deregulation of health and safety and the reporting of it. I hope that the Minister will tell us what the existing staffing levels are at the HSE, because I would be concerned had the numbers reduced over the past 10 years. Clearly, we should not be cutting jobs at the Health and Safety Executive.

In Scotland, under section 29 of the Inquiries into Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths etc. (Scotland) Act 2016, Ministers are required to report on fatalities. Fatal accident inquiries are the legal mechanism through which deaths in the workplace are investigated. Inquiries are mandatory for deaths occurring in the workplace, as well as in custody, or when the circumstances are deemed to be in the public interest, and they are usually held in the sheriff courts. The outcomes of all fatal accident inquiries since 1999 are publicly available and can be accessed online via the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. The all-party group calls for an equivalent system to be introduced in the rest of the UK, to ensure that employers are held to account for fatal injuries occurring as a result of workers falling from height, and that incidents are reported with sufficient information.

The Scottish Government are looking at the law on culpable homicide and considering proposals made by Members of the Scottish Parliament. For example, Claire Baker MSP launched a consultation, which ran from 7 November to 23 April this year, on how the law on culpable homicide can be tightened, and the related Bill appears to have cross-party support.

Companies can be prosecuted under the UK Government’s Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007. We support the Act, but have concerns about the lack of prosecutions under it. Will the Minister talk a bit about that when he responds to the debate? Individual directors can also be charged with the common law offence of culpable homicide or with offences under health and safety legislation, but the SNP position is that if existing legislation can be improved by devolved legislation, we will consider what further steps should be taken.

In the 2018-19 programme for government, the Scottish Government committed to establish in spring this year a new support service—developed and delivered with Victim Support Scotland—to give families bereaved by murder and culpable homicide dedicated and continuous support. That is an important part of the Government’s programme. Wider work to look at the law of homicide is also under way. The Scottish Government asked the Scottish Law Commission to consider that law, and examination commenced in February 2018. Our view is that every fatality at a place of employment in Scotland should be investigated, and that the nature of the deaths requires a detailed and often lengthy investigation involving complex, technical and medical issues and expert opinion. The law already allows individual directors to be charged, which of course is necessary.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central. Clearly, Scottish National party Members are leading the way in this Parliament in promoting the rights of workers. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is campaigning against discrimination against young people in the living wage; my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), is producing legislation on unpaid work trials; and I am promoting—this debate is another opportunity to do so—the Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill, which touches on issues such as a worker’s status. People in industries such as construction believe that they are workers or employees, but later find out that they are somehow self-employed. We need to get on top of the issue of precarious work.
Thank you, Mr McCabe, for chairing this debate. I commend to the House the report of the all-party parliamentary group on working at height.

1.58 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr McCabe.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on securing this important debate, and on her work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on working at height, which produced a thought-provoking report in February. I thank her for her comprehensive and effective speech.

From conservation work on Big Ben to pruning trees and cleaning windows, it is estimated that each year, more than 1 million British businesses and 10 million workers carry out tasks that involve some sort of working at height. Action to protect the health and safety of workers has been a central issue for the labour movement throughout its history. Lord Shaftesbury, a Conservative politician, also campaigned for factory reform in the 19th century. However, some Conservatives see health and safety as part of some kind of “nanny state”, implying that there is no need for health and safety regulation, and that providing safety in the workplace is in some way damaging to the economy. The last leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister said, in January 2012:

“One of the coalition’s new year resolutions is this: kill off the health and safety culture for good.”

That is truly shocking, and shows a real disregard for the health and well-being of millions of working people throughout the country.

Strong health and safety legislation is as important today as it has always been. The latest figures for injuries and fatalities at work show that there is still a real need for robust health and safety regulations, especially for working at height. In 2017-18 there were 555,000—over half a million—non-fatal injuries at work, according to figures from the Health and Safety Executive, which has been responsible for safety in the workplace since 1974.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on drawing attention to the Labour party’s strong track record and pivotal role in health and safety legislation. In 2017-18, 8% of all non-fatal workplace injuries were due to a fall from height, and of the 144 workers killed at work, 35 were due to a fall from height. Deaths due to a fall from height represent a high proportion of the total, that being the largest reason for a death at work. The figures for 2017-18 are broadly in line with the average of 37 a year since 2013-14. Twenty of those 35 deaths occurred in the construction industry, although falls from height also occur in other parts of the economy, such as agriculture and the service industries.

The last Labour Government introduced the Work at Height Regulations 2005, which are widely considered to have led to a significant improvement in safety at work. The number of deaths resulting from falls from height at work in 2017-18 was 27% lower than in 2005-06. Nevertheless, we need to do more. I want to talk about three areas—reporting, enforcement and the future uncertainty we face as we leave the European Union.

On reporting, the HSE has estimated that only around half of non-fatal injuries are reported, and that the self-employed, who make up 37% of jobs in construction, report an even smaller proportion. In her report for the last Labour Government into the underlying causes of fatal accidents in the construction industry, Baroness Donaghy commented:

“It is a disgrace that we have such a low level of reporting of serious accidents, let alone near-misses”.

Yet in 2013, the HSE amended the regulation on the reporting of injuries at work to reduce the reporting burden on industry, so detailed data on falls is no longer collected. What consideration have the Government given to requiring reporting of the circumstances of a fall, such as how it happened, the distance, and the experience and training that the person had received on working at height? Regulation and reporting are vital, as is enforcement.

On enforcement, according to Government figures, the Treasury’s funding for the HSE is set to be over £100 million less this year than in 2009-10, which is a cut of 45%—almost half—over 10 years. That is shocking. How do the Government seriously expect the HSE to continue to carry out its statutory duties, as well as take on new ones post Brexit, with cuts of that scale to its funding? The number of enforcement notices issued by the HSE fell in 2016-17 and 2017-18. What assessment has the Minister’s Department made of the impact of funding cuts on the number of inspections that HSE undertakes? The Government have so far failed to respond to the tailored review of the HSE, which was published in November last year. When do they intend to do so?

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) mentioned Brexit; if future funding is one key uncertainty for health and safety regulation, Brexit is another. After the UK joined what was then the European Economic Community in 1973, European directives on health and safety mirrored much of what was in the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. However, in certain respects European legislation went further, and working at height was one area where UK regulation followed a European directive.

The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) said during the referendum campaign that the UK could slash safety standards after Brexit. That is a truly shocking proposal and shows disregard for the well-being of working people. Will the Minister give us a guarantee that existing health and safety legislation will not be watered down after we leave the EU, and that the EU seeks to extend health and safety legislation, the protection that UK workers enjoy will keep pace?

The tragedy is that falls from height can very often be preventable, through proper enforcement of existing legislation and increased awareness of good practice. The 2005 regulations state that work at height should be avoided altogether wherever practical. As has been mentioned, new technology makes that possible in certain circumstances, such as the use of drones to inspect bridges or buildings. New technology also provides real opportunities for companies and organisations to provide vital health and safety training to help protect people in the workplace.

Rita Donaghy’s 2009 report into fatal accidents in construction was titled “One Death is too Many”. I am sure that is a sentiment that we can all agree on.
Those who criticise health and safety regulations as an example of a nanny state might reflect on the impact that deaths and injuries at work have on bereaved families or victims whose lives are shattered as a result.

2.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Thank you for being in the chair in today’s debate, Mr McCabe. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) is right that it feels a little like a reunion of the Work and Pensions Committee, but it is certainly a privilege to respond on behalf of the Government to a worthy and important report, and I will attempt to address as many of the points as I can.

I should explain from the outset that I am not the specific Minister with departmental responsibility for this matter. I convey the apologies of the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), who will ultimately respond to the report on behalf of the Government. Departmental officials have briefed me on the report to allow me to respond to many points, which I will do to the best of my abilities. I reiterate the point that I made to the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson)—that the HSE needs to feed the Government its views on the report as a whole and on the specific recommendations.

It is right and proper to thank all colleagues for attending; I think the hon. Member for Glasgow South West made the fair point that today, many constituents will enjoy the pleasure of their Member’s company at the local elections and the like. Otherwise, I am certain more would have been here. I put on the record the Government’s acceptance and acknowledgment of the cross-party working that went into the production of the report. That is to the credit of all colleagues who have worked together. I also thank the Access Industry Forum and all the witnesses. Sadly, we will have to discuss Brexit briefly in a moment, but it is often said that this Parliament is solely focused on thing, unaware that there are many other things that Members are doing. The issue we are talking about is of great worth and merit and is part of an ongoing process.

I will push back slightly on the right hon. Member for Delyn, who seemed to suggest that it was solely the Labour Government who were interested in these matters on an ongoing basis. He will be aware of the Factories Act 1961 and the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992. Successive Governments, of whatever shape or form, have attempted to address health and safety at work in a multitude of ways, to try to reduce the number of accidents and increase the degree of ongoing safety.

I spent 15 years representing claimants who had suffered similar injuries to those described by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) in her opening speech. I worked on approximately 200 or 300 personal injury cases concerning falls from height, sometimes union-backed. I endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow South West that there have been many examples where unions have been very supportive of members and have ensured that they got the best possible representation and compensation. I was lucky enough to represent many unions on an ongoing basis in cases in the past.

This issue affects a whole host of different industries. It is easy to say that it affects only scaffolders and roofers, but it can also affect farmers and, self-evidently, people who work in the oil and gas industry. Bluntly, it also affects the mum or dad who chooses to fix their own windows or roof, or to mess with their television aerial. There are many examples of individuals working from height without necessarily understanding the consequences of what they are getting involved with.

I welcome the debate. Let me say, for the avoidance of doubt, that this is an extremely important issue. I shall make a few preliminary points. First, the Health and Safety Executive has informed the Government that it will respond formally to the APPG’s report in due course. I have pressed for a specific timetable. I do not want to inscribe this in stone, but I am told that a response will be made within 60 working days at the very latest, and cover all the points raised in the report and any other issues raised in this debate that are outstanding. I assure the House that the HSE’s response will be deposited in the Library.

It is right to note—I do so not to make a party political point, but because we cannot discuss health and safety at work without putting this on the record—that Great Britain has lower levels of accidents and injuries at work than most nations. The report states fairly at page 6 that, since the introduction of the 2005 regulations, “the UK has consistently had some of the lowest workplace fatality and serious injury rates in the European Union.”

The report cites the 2014 statistics for the UK and similar countries: the UK had 0.55 fatalities per 100,000 employees, compared with 3.14 in France and 0.81 in Germany. We all agree that one fatality is too many, but that should not detract from the fact that successive Governments have done good work in this field. I also recognise, if it needs to be recognised, that falls from height are a major cause of serious and fatal injuries. The right hon. Member for Delyn fairly made the point, with the poignant tale of his father, that this issue affects each and every person in our communities.

As a practising barrister, I was involved in cases concerning scaffolders and the like both before and after the Work at Height Regulations 2005 were introduced. The report rightly makes it clear that it is agreed that the regulations are fit for purpose and fundamentally appropriate. The HSE has indicated that it welcomes the report and the desire for action. A key strand of the “Helping Great Britain Work Well” strategy for health and safety is acting together, and it is pleasing to see the work at height industry coming together in this way. The HSE undertakes to continue working with stakeholders to promote better working practices in the industry to try to protect workers in the workplace.

The report recommends that the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995—RIDDOR, as we all know them—should include enhanced reporting, so that additional intelligence is available. When those regulations were amended in 2013, the key change for work at height was the removal of the high fall—2 metres and above—and low fall categories. However, the free text box on the current reporting form where the reporter includes information about the incident
remains the same, and can still be used to record additional information about any work at height incident. That text box can be used to record information about the height of a fall.

The report suggests that enhanced reporting would help to identify the causes of falls from height. It is not for me to come to that conclusion at this stage, but we will listen to the HSE before the relevant Minister comes to a view on that issue. The HSE and industry have already undertaken plenty of excellent work in investigating work at height accidents, and they have established the main reasons behind such falls. Much good guidance is already available from the HSE and industry that addresses this important topic. The Government feel that it is fundamentally more important to place emphasis on the need to follow existing guidance and good practice to prevent falls wherever practicable, or to mitigate their effects should a fall occur.

Another recommendation in the report is that an independent body should be appointed to allow confidential reporting, and that that reporting should include near misses and other non-RIDDOR accidents. The HSE is fundamentally supportive of efforts in this area, but wishes to respond in more detail. However, it is right to put it on the record—that addresses points that several Members made—that the HSE operates a complaints advisory team, to which employees and the public may report concerns about work at height and dangerous practices in the workplace. Crucially, people may make such reports anonymously, and that can lead to the HSE inspecting areas of concern. The Government believe it is important that near misses are reported first and foremost to the employer as soon as possible. It is the employer who needs to investigate and introduce controls.

The report further suggests extending Working Well Together beyond the construction sector. The Access Industry Forum already helpfully provides financial and resource support to Working Well Together, so its groups around Great Britain can run “Working Well at Height” safety and health awareness days. The HSE already works with the Access Industry Forum and Working Well Together. It will continue to promote them and will explore whether there is an appetite for extending the campaign outside the construction sector. The agriculture sector is well known for similar incidents, so the HSE will discuss with the Access Industry Forum how it might also support that sector. As a representative of a very strong farming community, I will be looking to the National Farmers Union in my area to see how it wishes to address this point locally.

A couple of colleagues mentioned Brexit. I wish to make it very clear that we agree with the statement on page 10 of the report that the Government must ensure that no change is made as a result of Brexit that makes individuals who work at height less safe. On that point, the Prime Minister has committed to protecting workers’ rights as the UK leaves the European Union. That includes specific health and safety protections. The Prime Minister has said that there will be no lowering of standards after Brexit.

Hon. Members mentioned the approach in Scotland, where fatal accident inquiries are reported on and then entered on a publicly accessible database. I accept that the report recommends that a similar process should be introduced for England and Wales. I do not want to give a politician’s answer, but I will do so, to a degree. This is an issue for the Ministry of Justice. To be fair to the Ministry of Justice, it is aware of the issue and is looking to respond as part of the HSE’s response and the Government’s response.

The Ministry of Justice will certainly come back to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central and the APPG on this matter, but I have been asked to make a couple of points in the interim. In England and Wales, the coroners’ courts make findings and reach conclusions. Although those are not routinely made available, they are read out in public at the hearing, and there is a system where the coroner will write to ask relevant bodies and organisations to take action if they believe there is a continued risk to life. Those reports and responses are published in “prevention of future deaths” reports by the Chief Coroner and are publicly available. On that particular issue, the Government at present have no plans to change the proven process, but we will wait to see what the HSE says.

Several colleagues spoke about the causes of falls. I think it is fair to say that there is a fundamental view that the causes of falls are already well known from the many HSE and industry investigations. It is questionable whether gathering additional information would reveal new causes, given the extensive work over decades to identify what causes falls. I endorse entirely the benefits of enhanced data and of drones providing better preliminary assessments of the proposed height at which one would be working. There is absolutely an ongoing desire to ensure that there are fewer injuries in the long term.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central for her efforts, both in terms of the report and in bringing this important matter before the House. I hope Members are assured that there is a plan to take this matter forward. The Government will continue to support the work of the HSE and industry in reducing the number of serious injuries and fatalities, and we will provide a response shortly. The Minister with responsibility for this area looks forward to meeting the APPG and having an opportunity to set out the Government’s position following the HSE’s response.

2.20 pm

Alison Thewliss: I thank everyone for coming and contributing to the debate. I appreciate what the Minister said about not perhaps being the correct Minister to cover this debate, but I appreciate the way in which he responded and the expertise he brought to the debate, which is important. I am glad that the HSE will provide a comprehensive response to the report, and that that will be made available at the Commons Library for others to see. That is useful.

I also look forward to receiving the reports on how fatal accident inquiries might be widened or used. I appreciate that that is a Ministry of Justice issue, but the implications of such inquiries, where we have seen them in Scotland, have been quite useful in their process and in making public recommendations. There is currently a much delayed and much publicised one going on about the Clutha helicopter crash in Glasgow. That has involved a huge evidence-gathering process. People will be able to go and watch, and in time the findings will come out. It is a good process for finding out where something has gone wrong and putting it right for the future.
[Alison Thewliss]

The Minister is correct about the farming sector. The NFU was a keen contributor to the report. I had a conversation with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—unusually, he is not in his place—who said he was away to fix something on the roof of his farm with a ladder and then he realised, “What am I doing? I am on my own here. Why would I go up on the roof with a ladder? Something could happen.” The House would be much poorer for the loss of him, so I am glad that he saw that. That story shows how easily decisions can be made that cause people to take risks without thinking them through and end up injured or worse. More can be done on educating the public about that.

There is still a need for enhanced reporting, so I urge the Minister to look at that. While there is the free text area within the reporting, it does not go far enough to gather the right information. We therefore do not know whether someone using equipment was trained, had particular qualifications or was part of any organisations that might have given advice. It would be useful to have as much background detail as possible to get to the bottom of what went awry to cause the accident.

Guy Opperman: I am interrupting the hon. Lady’s final peroration to add two points. First, I accept that that is a live issue; to pretend otherwise as to how we do that would be wrong. She has also reminded me that I failed to respond to a point raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) about blacklisting, which is a loathsome practice. It is quite right for a Government Minister to make it absolutely clear that we wholeheartedly oppose such a process. Employers have a legal duty to consult employees and their representatives on HSE complaints. Blacklisting is absolutely not acceptable in any way, and full support will be given to those, of whatever shape or form, who bring forward cases of such heinous behaviour.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister for adding that—I was about to come on to blacklisting and the risk that some workers feel on reporting when things are not right. Employees in precarious employment in particular feel that if they become a whistleblower, they could quickly and easily lose their job, with the issue going unresolved for the next worker to come up against as well. I urge him to consider whether the anonymous reporting scheme that he mentioned covers that eventuality. There may be a time lag between someone’s reporting and an investigation; investigating needs to be done more efficiently and quickly, so that there can be a resolution without that worker being put at individual risk of losing their employment.

I was glad to hear what the Minister said about workers’ rights. We will hold the Government to that—he had better believe that we will. Working at height is increasingly complex, because buildings and the employment spectrum are more complex. It is right that the regulations are looked at again to ensure that they are entirely fit for purpose, because things have changed dramatically since they were written and we need to ensure that they are always effective in protecting workers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered preventing serious injury and fatalities while working at height.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): The next debate is scheduled to start at 3 pm, so I am required to suspend the sitting until then.

2.25 pm

Sitting suspended.
Sharia Law Courts

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sharia law courts in the UK.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I am extremely grateful to all hon. Members who have turned up on a Thursday afternoon when there is not much business on and at a time of local elections. That shows their devotion to this House and to the subject of this debate.

The genesis of this debate is a report prepared for the Council of Europe in January, at which I happened to speak. The report was led by a paper prepared by a member of the Spanish Socialist party, and it looked at the compatibility of sharia law with the European convention on human rights. I will turn to that topic later. The report singled out the UK, not completely approvingly, for how it approached this issue, as well other countries, such as Greece, which have taken a different approach.

When approaching this issue, I am aware that the charge of Islamophobia may be levelled against us, but it is right that we consider sharia law courts or councils in terms of their conformity with the European convention on human rights, just as we do with other aspects of UK society. I am also aware of “The independent review into the application of sharia law in England and Wales”, which was produced in February 2018. The review was chaired by Professor Mona Siddiqui of the University of Edinburgh, and the panel included distinguished lawyers and religious and theological experts. I read that report with great interest.

The Council of Europe called on the authorities of the United Kingdom to do a number of things. I will read them out but comment on only one of them. First, it called on the UK to “ensure that sharia councils operate within the law, especially as it relates to the prohibition of discrimination against women, and respect all procedural rights.” Secondly, it called on the UK to review the Marriage Act 1949, to make it a legal requirement for Muslim couples to civilly register their marriage before or at the same time as their Islamic ceremony, as—

the report claims—

“is already stipulated by law for Christian and Jewish marriages.” As an aside, I am aware that a number of imams are also qualified registrars and can therefore conduct the civil service at the same time as the religious service. Similarly, a number of Catholic priests are qualified registrars. However, I do not think there is a legal requirement for that to go ahead.

Thirdly, the Council called on the UK to “take appropriate enforcement measures to oblige the celebrant of any marriage, including Islamic marriages, to ensure that the marriage is also civilly registered before or at the same time as celebrating the religious marriage.”

Fourthly, it called on the UK to ensure that vulnerable women are provided with safeguards against exploitation and informed about their right to seek redress before UK courts. The Council also called for awareness-raising campaigns to be put in place, to encourage Muslim communities to acknowledge and respect women’s rights in civil law, especially in marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance. As an aside, I think there is a lot to be said for emphasising that particular point and ensuring that we indulge in awareness campaigns.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point about awareness. Like him, I carefully read the independent Home Office report, which said:

“It is this misrepresentation of sharia councils as courts that leads to public misconceptions over the primacy of sharia over domestic law and concerns of a parallel legal system.”

Although the hon. Gentleman has been careful with his language, as I would expect, the Order Paper says “sharia law courts”, which is precisely what the Home Office report said we should avoid.

John Howell: I realise that the independent report calls them sharia law councils, but we can come on to look at that in the moment. I was reading out the Council of Europe’s descriptions, which calls them sharia law courts. We should continue with that, at least for the moment.

The Council’s next point was that the UK should “conduct further research on the ‘judicial’ practice of Sharia councils”—

to use that term—

“and on the extent to which such councils are used voluntarily, particularly by women, many of whom would be subject to intense community pressure in this respect.”

The Council of Europe committee held meetings with Professor Ruud Peters of the University of Amsterdam and Professor Mathias Rohe of Erlangen University in Germany. On 5 September 2017 it held another hearing and the participants included Mr Konstantinos Tsitselikis, professor in human rights law and international organisations at the University of Macedonia, and Ms Machteld Zee, a political scientist and author. Finally, I was pleased that the committee held an exchange of views with Professor Mona Siddiqui, whom I have already mentioned.

Professor Sandberg from Cardiff University has recently said:

“Surely the issue of concern is whether people are pressurised into the form of alternative dispute resolution provided by Sharia councils? The Resolution distinguishes between situations where Muslims submit voluntarily and, alternatively, where they submit under social pressure.”

He says that the report does not pursue that any further and:

“That, however, is the nub of the issue.”

He goes on to say:

“Where the decision to use a religious authority for dispute resolution is genuinely voluntary on the part of both parties then this should be no more objectionable than any other form of alternative dispute resolution”—

provided that it also conforms with UK law.

As the Council’s report makes clear, sharia law is understood as the law to be obeyed by every Muslim. It divides all human action into five categories: what is obligatory, recommended, neutral, disapproved of and prohibited. It makes two forms of legal ruling: one designed
to organise society and one to deal with everyday situations. It also has a legal opinion, intended to cover a special situation.

Sharia law, therefore, is meant in essence to be a positive law, enforceable on Muslims. Although most states with Muslim majorities have inserted in their constitutions a provision referring to Islam or Islamic law, the effect of those provisions is largely symbolic or confined to family law. Those religious provisions may have a legal effect if raised in the courts, and a political effect if they intrude into institutional attitudes and practices.

I shall consider the general principles of sharia law in relation to the European convention on human rights, particularly article 14, on the prohibition of discrimination on grounds such as sex and religion, and article 5 of protocol 7 to the convention, which establishes equality between spouses in law. Other aspects of the convention may also have an effect.

In Islamic family law, men have authority over women, because God has made the one superior to the other. It goes on to say that good women are obedient. It encourages women who stray from those norms to suffer punishment. In sharia law, adultery is strictly prohibited, and legal doctrine holds that the evidence must take the form of corroborating testimony from witnesses to prove an individual’s guilt. In the case of rape, which is seldom committed in public, there must be four male witnesses who are good Muslims, so punishing the rapist is difficult, if not impossible. In practice, women are obliged to be accompanied by a man when they go out, which is not conducive to their independence.

Under Islamic law, a husband has a unilateral right to divorce, although it can be delegated to the wife and she can therefore exercise her right to divorce. Otherwise, she may initiate a divorce process but only with the consent of her husband, by seeking what is known as khula, in which case the wife forgoes her dowry. In cases where the husband has deserted the wife, has failed to co-operate with the divorce process or is acting unreasonably, the marriage may be dissolved, but only by a sharia ruling. While divorce by mutual consent is enshrined in Islamic law, the application must in this case come from the wife, since the husband can repudiate his wife at any time. There is also the question of equal rights regarding divorce arrangements, such as custody of children.

For the division of an estate among the heirs, distinctions are made according to the sex of the heir. A male heir has a double share, whereas a female heir has a single share. In addition, the rights of a surviving wife are half those of a surviving husband. Non-Muslims do not have the same rights as Muslims in criminal and civil law under sharia law. That applies, for example, to the weight attached to their testimony in court, which is discrimination on the grounds of religion within the meaning of articles 9 and 14 of the convention.

The European Court of Human Rights had the chance to rule on the incompatibility of sharia law with human rights in the early 2000s, in its judgment on the Welfare party v. Turkey, which held that

“Turkey, like any other Contracting Party, may legitimately prevent the application within its jurisdiction of private-law rules of religious inspiration prejudicial to public order and the values of democracy for Convention purposes (such as rules permitting discrimination based on the gender of the parties concerned, as in polygamy and privileges for the male sex in matters of divorce and succession).”

In that particular case, the decision by the Turkish constitutional court to order the dissolution of the Welfare party, which advocated the introduction of sharia law, was held to be compatible with the convention, and the Court clearly affirmed the following:

“It is difficult to declare one’s respect for democracy and human rights while at the same time supporting a regime based on sharia, which clearly diverges from Convention values, particularly with regard to its criminal law and criminal procedure, its rules on the legal status of women and the way it intervenes in all spheres of private and public life in accordance with religious precepts.”

With respect to sharia law itself, the Court expressly stated that

“a political party whose actions seem to be aimed at introducing sharia in a State Party to the Convention can hardly be regarded as an association complying with the democratic ideal that underlies the whole of the Convention”.  

However, although the Court has ruled that sharia law is incompatible with the convention, that does not mean that there is absolute incompatibility between the convention and Islam. The Court also recognised that religion is “one of the most vital elements that go to make up the identity of believers and their conception of life”.

Accordingly, the Court’s relatively firm position should not be taken as a rejection of all elements of sharia or of Islam as a whole, while taking into account the existence of structural incompatibilities between Islam and the convention which, as far as sharia law is concerned, are sometimes absolute and sometimes relative.

It is also likely that a large number of cases concerning the position of Muslim women under Islamic law never come before the ordinary courts or the European Court of Human Rights because women are under enormous pressure from their families and their communities to comply with the demands of the informal religious courts. Such cases give rise to the question whether to use the concept of public order to refuse to recognise, or enforce, discriminatory decisions, even if they are not challenged by the women concerned.

There is currently no single accepted definition of the term “sharia council” in the United Kingdom, where such bodies generally provide advice and attempt to resolve disputes relating to family or personal issues according to the principles of sharia law. However, little is known about their work, which is conducted in private, and decisions are not published, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability. There is also uncertainty about the number of sharia courts operating in the UK. A study by the University of Reading identified 30 groups involved in such activity, and a report by the think-tank Civitas estimated that at least 85 groups are in operation, although that figure also includes informal tribunals run out of mosques or online forums.

Sharia councils provide a form of alternative dispute resolution, something I am very familiar with, having chaired the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution for the past three years. Members of the Muslim community voluntarily consent to accept the religious jurisdiction of sharia councils. Marital issues and the granting of Islamic marriage divorces account for about 90% of their work. They also advise in matters
of law, including issues of inheritance, probate and wills and Islamic commercial law contracts, and they provide mediation, counselling and religious ruling services.

Sharia councils are not considered part of the British legal system. They are not courts and their decisions are not legally binding. However, despite having no judicial authority, some councils see themselves as authoritative on religious issues, and the power of sharia councils lies in how they are perceived by their communities.

A significant number of Muslims do not have a marriage recognised under British law. Those who do not register their marriage under civil law, and some who have been married abroad, have little redress available to them, as their position under British law is similar to that of unmarried cohabitants who have few financial remedies on the breakdown of their relationship. A significant number of Muslim couples fail to civilly register their religious marriages, and some Muslim women therefore have no option of obtaining a civil divorce. Some women may have no other option but to obtain a religious divorce, for which the judgment of a sharia council is normally required.

Furthermore, even in cases where women have a civil law marriage, some might seek the decision of a sharia council for reasons of self-identity or community standing, or to provide reassurance that they have the religious freedom to remarry within their faith. Those who obtain a civil divorce but not a religious divorce might find it difficult to remarry—a position sometimes referred to as a “limping marriage”. One of the experts invited to testify before the committee, Ms Zee, denounced what she described as “marital captivity”.

There are numerous reports citing examples of how Muslim women have been discriminated against by sharia councils. Examples of such discrimination include women being pressured into mediation, including victims of domestic abuse; greater weight being given to the husband’s account of reasons for divorce; women not being questioned impartially by council members, who are often all men, and feeling blamed for the breakdown of the marriage; and unjustified requirements to pay back their dowry.

There are also allegations that sharia councils have issued discriminatory rulings on child custody. The Casey review cited claims that “some Sharia Councils have been supporting the values of extremists, condoning wife-beating, ignoring marital rape and allowing forced marriage.”

Researchers were told that “some women were unaware of their legal rights to leave violent husbands and were being pressurised to return to abusive partners or attend reconciliation sessions with their husbands despite legal injunctions in place to protect them from violence.”

The majority of the evidence, however, is anecdotal, as little empirical evidence has been gathered in relation to users of sharia councils. Further research is therefore necessary; I am aware that the Select Committee on Home Affairs has done some work. Mechanisms are required to provide safeguards and ensure that vulnerable women are not exploited or put at risk. Many of the women are not aware of their rights to seek redress before the British courts.

Sharia councils should not be confused with arbitration tribunals. The Muslim arbitration Tribunal was established in 2007 under the Arbitration Act 1996. It operates within the framework of British law and its decisions can be enforced by civil courts, provided that they have been reached in accordance with the legal principles of the British system. Its legal authority comes from the agreement of both parties to give the tribunal power to rule on their case. In cases where decisions do not conform to the principles of British law, they may simply be quashed. Moreover, the 1996 Act cannot be used to exclude the jurisdiction of the family law courts. The MAT can therefore conduct arbitration according to Islamic personal law on issues such as commercial and inheritance disputes. Many of those issues were considered by Baroness Cox, who promoted the Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill in 2011. I will leave hon. Members to look at that.

The independent review was set up because sharia courts were deemed to be discriminating against women, as I have outlined. It has three recommendations. The first is to ensure that civil marriages are conducted before or at the same time as the Islamic marriage, in line with the way in which most Christian and many Jewish marriages are conducted. It also states that there should be a requirement for Muslim couples to civilly register their marriage, and that there be consequential changes to divorce.

I will skip the second recommendation and go to the third recommendation, which is to carry out some regulation of the sharia courts. The Government have declined to do that, for the obvious reason that that would legitimise the courts as part of the judicial establishment, which they have no intention of doing.

To go back one, the second recommendation is for a general awareness campaign to acknowledge women’s rights and to inform women of those rights, including the fact that arbitration that applies sharia law in respect of financial or child arrangements falls foul of the Arbitration Act.

The independent review sets out several bad practices, including inappropriate and unnecessary questioning about personal relationship matters; asking a forced marriage victim to attend the sharia council at the same time as her family; insisting on any form of mediation as a necessary preliminary; and inviting women to make concessions to their husbands to secure a divorce. Lengthy processes also mean that, although divorces are rarely refused, they can be drawn out.

There are several other faults with the system, such as inconsistency, a lack of safeguarding policies or clear signposting, and the fact that, even with a decree absolute, a religious divorce is not always a straightforward process. Civil legal terms are adopted inappropriately, which leads to confusion. There are few women panel members of sharia councils, and some panel members have only recently moved to the UK, so they have no understanding of the UK system.

It is often proposed that, based on the evidence of discriminatory practices in some sharia councils, they should all be shut down and banned. The main problem with that argument is that a ban cannot be imposed on organisations that can set up voluntarily anywhere and that operate only on the basis of the credibility given to them by a certain community. The evidence that the review heard indicates that women use sharia courts almost solely to obtain religious divorces, for a number of different reasons, such as community acceptance of the divorce and their own remarriage hopes.
3.26 pm

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I wear many hats in this debate, which I thank the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for securing. Contrary to the accusations of Islamophobia, I am a Muslim woman who is a member of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims. We have just launched our definition of Islamophobia, which I am proud that the Labour party has adopted; it would be useful if the hon. Gentleman’s party did, too. This debate, which brings the issue of sharia councils to the House, is welcome because it is right that we have such conversations.

I agree with many things that the hon. Gentleman has said. Sharia councils are not entirely fit for purpose, as I am only too familiar with as a former member of the Home Affairs Committee with the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). Before the review, the Committee took evidence from many people about sharia councils. Yes, 90% of their work is about divorces, and yes, despite that, they do not offer counselling services. I have raised that privately and publicly with imams and scholars across the board. I would also say, however, that while it is right that we debate the fact that sharia councils have a huge way to go, we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

One thing I really struggled with in the previous speech was the idea that God made men superior to women. I am not a theologian; I am a politician, but one thing I am clear about as a Muslim woman is that my God did not make me unequal to a man. He gave me many rights and I enjoy those rights. One of those rights affords me the ability to vote for me and put me here. I disagree with the idea that in Islam, God makes men superior to women. The idea of needing four witnesses to rape is also news to me.

During our Select Committee inquiry, we also heard the idea that is out there, and peddled by the right-wing media, that sharia courts are taking over and replacing the British legal system and judiciary. There is absolutely no truth in that, because the first law of sharia—the first concept and the key tenet of it—is that the law of the land takes precedence.

I really struggle with the idea that somehow Muslims need to accept the law of the land—Muslims do accept the law of the land. The majority of Muslims in this country, as with the majority of people of any faith or the majority of people of no faith, accept the law of this land. However, many people still break the law of this land. If we look at prisons, we see that the people who are convicted of breaking the law of this land are not just Muslims. Muslims do have respect for the law, and I take it very personally and feel really offended at the suggestion that Muslims need to accept the law of the land. We do accept it.

There is not a requirement for there to be four witnesses to a rape, and as for the idea that a husband has a unilateral right to ask for a divorce, to return to the Select Committee inquiry, we heard lots of evidence against that. As a Muslim woman, I can instigate a divorce. Every Muslim woman in this country can instigate a divorce. A Muslim woman does not need the permission of her husband; she can instigate it, and she can go and get that divorce. That is a right afforded to every Muslim woman.

Yes, there is a question as to whether every sharia council actually implements that and works to the letter of the law and to its essence. And many sharia councils do discriminate. We have heard horrific—horrible—cases of women being discriminated against. The Select Committee took evidence from women who had been forced to go back to the perpetrator of violence against them, rather than reporting that violence. As a Select Committee, we went out and took our inquiry into the community. And yes, we heard of issues involving women where the arbitration service did not work, and where women were discriminated against—of course we did. However, that is no different from any other community. I have heard of lots of cases from constituents who were not happy with what had happened in a court of law because they felt that they had to do things that were not conducive to women’s rights.

I speak from experience. I speak as the daughter of a woman who was convicted of murdering an abusive partner and served 14 years in prison; I speak as a woman who had a forced marriage at the age of 15. So I am absolutely familiar with the patriarchal cultures within which women are oppressed and abused, and I stand very tall against them; I really do. I know that when my mother sought help from the community, she was not afforded it. However, let me say this: more than 25 years ago, when my mother was driven to do what she did, there were many other women in prison at the same time, and many other women who had killed their abusive partner. In fact, the majority of women who are in prison have experienced some form of abuse. Women do not just willy-nilly go and kill people; it is not what we do.

What I am saying is that when women are abused, it is not just the sharia councils that have a responsibility to respond. I won an award in 1998—the Emma Humphreys award—and that was one of the first times that the issue
of abuse against women had been raised. Let us be clear: 90% of the sharia councils’ work is about divorce, which affects women. The nub of the issue for me is whether the sharia councils are fit for purpose for women, and treat women with equality and empower women. However, I agree that that is not the case at present.

Emma Humphreys was not a Muslim woman. There were many other women who went to prison for killing their partners. In those days, even judges did not have the understanding of domestic violence that we do today. So we as a country have come a long way. But in this country, which is such an advanced democracy, we have not got it right when it comes to women just yet. We have got a long way to go when it comes to giving women equality in courts of law, where there are years of experience and magnificent judges, but we still get it wrong.

So sharia courts do serve a purpose. They might not be brilliant and I absolutely agree that they need some regulation. Our Select Committee took evidence from the Muslim Women's Network UK; perhaps the hon. Member for Henley could read the Committee’s report and read the evidence from the Muslim Women’s Network UK about sharia councils.

We all agree that sharia councils cannot be abolished, as that would send them underground and we do not want that to happen. This service has to be available. As a Muslim woman, I need the sharia council; I want to be able to access the sharia council, but yes, I also want it to be fit for purpose.

What I do not want is for this issue to be conflated with anything else. The hon. Member for Henley, at the start of his speech, said that he would be accused of Islamophobia for securing this debate, but I would argue that that is not the case. However, I will also point out something else that he said, which is something I really struggle with, and this is where we enter a grey area.

I do not have an issue with anybody criticising my religion; I have no issues with that whatsoever. The definition—the definition by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims—of Islamophobia clearly sets out that there is nothing wrong with people having a debate about what Islam is and what Islam is not. However, in this debate today the hon. Gentleman referred to the Casey review, and when talking about it he said that its findings included sharia councils supporting extremists and wife-beating. I get some of that context, but the whole idea of extremism in sharia councils have yet to come across that. That is not the debate that I hoped to have today, and I did not expect to hear the word “extremist” mentioned in this debate.

As I have said, 90% of sharia councils’ work is about divorce. In my constituency of Bradford West I have addressed gatherings, including majority male or male-dominated gatherings, and I have talked to people and said, “Why is it that we have so much money when we spend on the mosques, yet we are not talking about having counselling services for women, even though divorce is such a big deal, tearing children and families apart? We need to have those support services in place.”

So I agree that sharia courts need regulation, but what I do not accept, and will not accept, are all of these ideas about all of the sharia councils, including the idea that God has made men superior to women, the idea that there need to be four witnesses to a rape, and even the idea that someone needs to say the talaq three times for divorce, and that a divorce can just be granted and a woman has to accept it. No, she does not.

Let me tell people something else that the sharia councils could do if they were fit for purpose, which is what we should be working towards. We have a marriage contract—a nikah—and in that nikah a woman can stipulate that the man must forgo his religious idea of a polygamous marriage, such that he can take another wife. A woman can stipulate that in the contract. That contract is absolutely legally binding, as far as the sharia council is concerned, and the woman can divorce if that contract is breached. There is no need for her to have her husband’s permission.

However, what I want is for every Muslim woman in this country to understand that their nikah does not give them legal protection in this country. Their nikah—their marriage contract—does not give them the rights that a civil marriage does. And we should be absolutely promoting that message across the communities, to make sure that women are empowered.

I have come across men who have abused their position and taken on a second wife, even though a nikah is in place, and not respected the rights of their first wife; and I absolutely agree that we should be making sure that that practice does not exist. We need to make sure that women understand that they can write contracts, and we need to train the imams and other people in how to give women their rights, including their contractual rights. And we should say to women, “Look, think outside the box. If you don’t want this in a marriage—in a normal relationship, we have what we like and what we don’t like, and that is the same with a marriage in Islam.”

There is nothing to stop any woman from doing that.

There are three things that I really want from this debate today. I want women who are listening to this debate, and the men who are listening to it, from all communities, to know that there is no Islamophobia in talking about sharia councils; in fact, such talk is very welcome. Sharia councils are not brilliant, they are not perfect, they have got a way to go, but we should support them and regulate them, or support them to regulate themselves, because communities have their own solutions; it is not necessary for us as a Parliament to impose solutions upon them.

We need to empower sharia councils; we need to get the regulations in place. We need to get women and men across the communities to understand that that contract does not give those rights under the law. As I have said before—I repeat it because I feel it is so important—the first tenet of sharia law is that the law of the land presides. The Daily Mail, The Sun and the right-wing media would have people believe that we have a parallel legal system running in this country. That does not exist. We are not about to bring sharia law into the country and take over. Less than 5% of the British community is Muslim, but somehow, I absolutely agree that we should be making all of these laws, but somehow 5% of the community is taking over and is going to abolish all of what we have done for hundreds and hundreds of years? That is not going to happen.

Let us empower the women; let us talk to the Muslim communities, not about the Muslim communities. Let us change how we deal with this issue, not conflate it...
with words such as extremism when we are having a debate about sharia councils. Ninety percent of what those councils do is about divorce. Please, let’s not go there.

I make a plea to the Minister: please look at the APPG definition of Islamophobia. I have talked to the Home Secretary, I have asked the Prime Minister and many Ministers, and there is an absolute denial that Islamophobia exists in the Government. That needs to be addressed, and when we have addressed it, these debates will be much more constructive. They would not need to start with a Member of Parliament saying that he is going to be accused of being Islamophobic, because this is not Islamophobic; this is the right debate to have for the sake of women, of equality, and of all our communities.

3:41 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintillock East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) on having secured this important debate about sharia councils. I take part in this debate with some trepidation, as it is a complicated issue, touching on family law, freedom of religion, culture, gender relations and many other issues in between. It is quite right to say that our response should first and foremost be informed by the experiences and views of those most affected: those are, of course, Muslim women, 90% of whom are seeking a divorce. Their experience of sharia councils varies greatly, which reflects the fact that sharia councils themselves vary significantly. Unsurprisingly there is no unanimous opinion, even among Muslim women, on how—or whether—we in Parliament or the Government should respond to some of the issues that have been raised, both today and in other reports.

I too was a member of the Select Committee on Home Affairs when it was looking at the issue of sharia councils. It was probably one of the most polarised issues that I looked at during my time on that Committee, involving widely diverging and strongly held opinions. On the one hand, at some of the events that the hon. Member for Bradford West has said. I spoke to women who were absolutely positive about their experience with sharia councils and how they had secured divorces there; others pointed to horrendous practices and discrimination, which we have heard about.

Dr Siddiqui’s report found similar disparities in practice, but that review, as we have also heard, concluded that banning sharia councils is not a realistic option; I support that conclusion. There is demand for advice and guidance, for determinations on the meaning of religious texts and procedures, and for religious divorce. That review warned that if anything, such a ban would likely drive councils underground, making transparency even more difficult and risking more widespread bad practice and discrimination.

The second issue I want to touch on is how civil marriage law can play a role in this area. I make absolutely clear that I am not a family lawyer, so I will not go into fine detail about the specific proposals for marriage law reform in England and Wales that Dr Siddiqui’s review put forward. However, it does seem—the evidence suggests this—that a significant number of Muslim women in

the UK have a religious marriage, but not one that is recognised by the civil law. As we have heard, that seriously limits the options and powers available to women, should that marriage then break down.

However, I went on to the website of Glasgow Central Mosque today to see what options there are for marriage. I was met with a well set-out and positive page that starts by celebrating the fact that “Family life is a building block of a successful society, and marriage is an occasion of great joy.” That page goes on to say:

“We can perform religious marriages, which are recognised by the law. A marriage ceremony (Nikah) at Glasgow Central Mosque must also be a religious marriage (i.e. the legal equivalent of a civil marriage conducted by a registrar). Our Imams are authorised to solemnise religious marriages, therefore it is not necessary to have a separate civil marriage. If the civil marriage has already taken place, please bring the marriage certificate on the day.”

I read an article by a Muslim woman who is a solicitor in Glasgow, who wrote about how the culture in the Glasgow mosques is one of working together to ensure that the civil requirements are met at the same time as the religious ones. It seems—of course, I stand to be corrected—that the general practice in that city has become to meet both religious and civil requirements at the same time. It would be good to know how that culture has come about. It would be good to find out what impact that has had on the number of women who are without a civil marriage in Glasgow and Scotland, and whether the doubling-up of those processes has been encouraged or helped by provisions in family law—slightly different in Scotland from those in England and Wales—or whether something else has made that happen.

That could inform our thinking, both in Scotland and in England and Wales, as to whether there needs to be legal change or whether we can do more in terms of culture and awareness raising, as the hon. Member for Bradford West has said.

John Howell: For many years I have been an organist, and I have played at Catholic weddings. In many cases, the service has been delayed because of the late arrival of the registrar. A marriage conducted by a priest is religiously legal, but in order to make it legally legal, a registrar has to be there. That seems to be the established position in the Catholic Church; as I understand it, only in the Anglican Church and the Church in Wales is the priest automatically a registrar.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is interesting to hear. If there is a way to remove such complications to ensure that such delays can be avoided, it should be looked at. I understand—I repeat, I am not a family lawyer, so I might be completely wrong—that that is not the position in Scotland, where priests are generally able to conduct both the religious and civil ceremonies in one go without the presence of a registrar. To my mind, that clearly makes things simpler.

The second group of recommendations in the Siddiqui report is essentially about empowering women, a topic on which I suspect we will all be at one. That seems to be front and centre of the issue that we face. There absolutely must be awareness raising about rights; for example, many of those who have ended up with a religious but not a civil marriage have done so purely because they did not know about the law or their status.
Awareness-raising about civil rights is only the first step in empowerment. Support is also needed to ensure that all are able to overcome the potentially “huge cultural barriers” described in the report, which can inhibit the exercise of rights even when people are aware that those rights exist. Those barriers stop women choosing to pursue civil remedies instead of religious ones. We need to give greater backing to all the NGOs, advice centres, human rights bodies and others that can provide that support. That is not just about supporting women to overcome barriers; those organisations can help to lower the barriers in the first place, encouraging a culture that respects women who choose to use their civil rights in the first place.

Do we need to go further? That question takes us on to the third group of recommendations in the Siddiqui report. The steps that we have just discussed about empowerment tend to focus on providing alternatives to sharia councils. We also need to ask whether we can improve practices in sharia councils themselves, which is perhaps the toughest issue.

As we have heard, the Siddiqui review recommended a form of regulation via a state-constituted body and a code of practice, and many sharia councils and women’s organisations supported such an approach. Presciently, the report acknowledged that the Government could be reluctant to adopt a wholesale regulatory approach for fear of being seen to legitimise a different system of law.

I can understand that response, but it should not be an end to the matter. Not adopting full-scale regulation does not absolve us of the need to look at the seriously bad practices that have been recorded in some cases, how that relates to the law, and whether the law can be changed in other ways to stop those practices. If I understood it correctly, that was what the dissenting opinion in Dr Siddiqui’s report was getting at.

For example, should we require in law that anyone providing advice about family law matters must provide signposting to civil remedies? How should the law respond if an institution is seen to aid and abet domestic violence by coercing a victim to mediate with the perpetrator? Are there existing regulations in respect of “service providers” that could be strengthened and better applied to stop the serious issues that we have seen? What should happen if evidence shows that councils are undertaking tasks that should be exclusively for the courts? Crucially, given that consent is so important, what is the legal response when certain councils are engaging in proceedings, providing opinions and making judgments when there was never genuine consent to the process in the first place? I do not have the answers to all those questions, but we have to consider them and be led by the evidence, particularly the evidence we hear from those who have been caught up in these processes.

On balance the Siddiqui review is correct that banning culture that respects women who choose to use their civil rights in the first place.

bad practice we have heard about. If we do all that, hopefully we can continue to protect the sharia councils that are doing a job that accords with all the values we want to be upheld, while at the same time clamping down on those that are not.

3.50 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I begin by commending the speeches that have been made from the Back Benches, starting with the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). I acknowledge his expertise and interest in this issue. I also acknowledge his work in the Council of Europe and the Justice Committee and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on her passionate speech. I congratulate her on her experience and expertise she brought to the debate today, both in terms of the workings of sharia councils and the extraordinarily passionate and personal section in her speech on her fight against patriarchal culture wherever it is found in our society. I thought she said something extraordinarily true when she said we should always look to talk to communities, not about them. That is something we can all take away from this debate.

As my hon. Friend set out—I echo it—there is nothing Islamophobic at all in bringing this debate forward. It has been a good debate across the board, but I want to speak about Islamophobia not only in the context of this debate, but in the wider context of our society and the time in which the debate takes place. We all acknowledge that Islamophobia and far-right attacks on Muslims here in the UK and across much of the world are rising. The figures show a record number of such attacks and incidents of abuse, and recently five mosques in Birmingham were vandalised on a single night. That does not happen in a vacuum.

While I do not want to stray beyond the confines of this debate, I do think that not only social media companies but the mainstream media have a responsibility for how such matters are covered. Indeed, the UK’s assistant commissioner at the Metropolitan police—the national head of our anti-terrorism measures in the UK—Neil Basu said:

“The reality is that every terrorist we have dealt with has sought inspiration from the propaganda of others, and when they can’t find it on Facebook, YouTube, Telegram or Twitter they only have to turn on the TV, read the paper or go to one of a myriad of mainstream media websites struggling to compete with those platforms.”

He was referring to the wake of the terrible Christchurch attacks in New Zealand and the fact that mainstream media were spreading the awful streaming of that terrible attack. We even see anti-Muslim sentiment whipped up in relation to the food that many Muslims eat. Clearly we all stand together in condemnation of such discrimination, abuse and hatred.

Protection of the rights of religious minorities is an essential feature of any democratic society, and there is a richness to our culture in the United Kingdom. We have people who practise many different religions. It is right that the state should not prevent people from acting according to their religious beliefs and cultural
traditions, provided that, first, it does not break the law—I include in that being compliant with our human rights obligations—and, secondly, it is always a product of free choice and by consent.

In that regard, I think we can pick up certain positive aspects, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West indicated. Mediation is based on consent with an agreement on process from both parties, and we can see that happening. We have heard about the percentage of divorces that are dealt with by sharia councils, but such things as boundary disputes, housing, wills, probate and estates can be dealt with, too. We can see positive outcomes when there is agreement on process. In addition, the hon. Member for Henley mentioned the work of the 2007 Muslim arbitration tribunal in that regard.

It is important that we stick to facts when it comes to any form of alternative dispute resolution or religious council, because there is no suggestion that they somehow trump or overrule the rule of law.

**Naz Shah:** Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the title of this debate, which refers to sharia courts, rather than sharia councils?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Indeed. I mentioned that when I intervened on the hon. Member for Henley, who referred to them as councils in his speech. One of the conclusions drawn by the Home Office’s independent report was that the real problem with using “courts” is that it gives the impression that there is a parallel or competing courts system when there is not. That is an extraordinarily important point, and it brings me to my next point, which is that we have to be very wary of misinformation, particularly given the idea that Parliament is somehow introducing this parallel law. That is clearly not the case. It is incumbent on us all to make that clear and to be careful about the language that we use in that regard.

To draw my remarks to a close, the two pillars have to be the rule of law, which will always be paramount, and a basis of consent. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West spoke extraordinarily powerfully about the role of women. She is an example of a woman in an extraordinary role and an exemplar to others. We must bear in mind, too, that human rights are always central to how we judge any form of alternative dispute resolution.

3.57 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar):** It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, not least because it protects me from being challenged by difficult questions from someone who did my job many years ago with great skill and knowledge.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this debate, which addresses an area of significant interest and importance. It is right that this House debates such issues. The work of the Council of Europe has no greater champion or more active participant than my hon. Friend. I am very pleased to be able to respond to the debate. It was due to be responded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), until his well-deserved promotion yesterday evening, so I confess that I am not an expert in this area, but I have been fascinated by the debate.

I am grateful to all hon. Members who have taken part late on a Thursday afternoon. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), not only for the passion and profound point that she is so selflessly bringing to her speeches, but for the depth of her knowledge and understanding of the subject. I am pleased she was able to be here.

I also recognise the contribution of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who spoke in his usual measured and sensible tone. His contribution was particularly valuable in highlighting the practice in Glasgow, which he touched on.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I omitted to mention the speech of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) not because I did not think that it was impressive, but simply because I treated it as a Front-Bench contribution, not a Back-Bench one. I join the Minister in commending the speech.

**Edward Argar:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for that intervention; I was about to respond to his speech. As ever, he made a powerful and sensible case. He highlighted, as other Members have, the importance of choosing our words with care when we speak in this House, not just on this subject but on all subjects, and the responsibility that we all have, and the broader responsibility of the media and others in this space, to choose our words with care.

I will set out the Government’s position on sharia law. As the Prime Minister has said, and as Members have mentioned today, there is one rule of law in the United Kingdom. In practice, that means, within each of the UK jurisdictions, a single system of law, legislated according to our constitutional arrangements by this Parliament or the devolved Administrations. Our judicial systems interpret, apply and, where necessary, enforce those laws. There is no parallel system of sharia law in operation in the UK; Her Majesty’s courts enforce our laws. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley was right to say that sharia law is not part of the British legal system. We must ensure that we do not succour such misinformation or misconceptions beyond these walls.

Our vision for our communities is that all British citizens, whatever their religious background, should be free to practise individual religious freedom. Many British people of different faiths and none benefit a great deal from the guidance that religious codes and other practices offer. Those values allow us to enjoy our individual freedoms and to lead varied lives in diverse communities. That is one of the great strengths of this great country; however, it has to be within a framework in which citizens share and respect common rights and responsibilities, with unfettered access to national law and our legal institutions to enforce those rights when necessary. Equal access to the law is a key benefit of living in a democratic society. As the hon. Member for Bradford West highlighted, that respect for the law is, I hope and believe, shared by everyone in our country, irrespective of background, gender, religion or any other factor.

If there is any conflict between religious practices and national law, national law must, and will, always prevail. In particular, I highlight the Equality Act 2010 and, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), highlighted, our strong
and important human rights legislation and the framework behind it. The Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government lead on the broader issues surrounding faith, community integration and British values. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for the operation of the justice system, including the use of non-court dispute resolution services such as mediation, and for the law governing marriage.

I heard the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley on the use of sharia religious principles and the operation of sharia councils. In particular, he highlighted concerns about various forms of discrimination on the basis of sex or religion in family matters, in particular divorce, in relation to the evidential weight applied. I acknowledge too the views set out by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in its resolution, passed in January this year, about the need to combat all forms of discrimination based on religion. As my noble and learned Friend Lord Keen of Elie has said, people may choose to abide by the interpretation and application of sharia principles if they wish to do so, provided their actions do not conflict with national law; however, that must be their free choice, and does not supersede national law.

The resolution reiterated the obligation on Council of Europe member states to protect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as enshrined in article 9 of the European convention on human rights. That right represents one of the pillars of a democratic society, and we share the Council’s view of that important principle. The resolution also noted that the exercise of the right to manifest one’s religion may be subject to some limitations necessary in a democratic society; it is not an unqualified right. Furthermore, it noted that the operation of religion should never act to limit or remove other convention rights or freedoms to which citizens in a democratic society are entitled, and we agree with that too.

While supporting and, I argue, even encouraging pluralism, the resolution expressed concern about the official or unofficial application of what it termed “sharia law” in several Council of Europe member states. As hon. Members have set out, in relation to the UK specifically the Council of Europe set out its concern about what it views as the judicial activities of sharia councils that, although not part of the British legal system, attempt to provide a form of alternative dispute resolution.

The resolution drew attention to members of the Muslim community, sometimes voluntarily but sometimes under pressure from peers or their own conscience, accepting the religious jurisdiction of such councils. The resolution further noted that it occurs mainly with regard to marital issues involving divorce, as the hon. Member for Bradford West said, and some matters related to inheritance and commercial contracts. The resolution expressed concern that the rulings of sharia councils could discriminate against women in divorce and inheritance cases.

The UK Government are clear that all rules, practices and bodies, including systems of alternative dispute resolution, must operate within the rule of law. Our law provides for a formal system of legally binding arbitration under the Arbitration Act 1996, which allows parties to consent to apply a system of law other than English law, with appropriate procedural safeguards to protect against duress or coercion. Arbitral decisions can play an important role, but only if the necessary procedural requirements and legal safeguards are satisfied. Most types of family dispute can be resolved in a legally binding way only if they are adjudicated by the courts.

The Government understand the concerns that some Members have set out about the operation of sharia councils. Indeed, the resolution on the basis of which the debate has been tabled acknowledged and welcomed the Home-Office-commissioned independent review, chaired by Professor Mona Siddiqui and commissioned by the now Prime Minister. That review looked at whether sharia law was being misused or applied in a way that is incompatible with domestic law in England and Wales, and whether there were discriminatory practices against women who use such councils.

Naz Shah: Does the Minister welcome, as I do, the finding in that review that, despite the fact that there is understood to be a conflict in very minute parts of sharia law, in terms of inheritance being discriminatory, in this country that would not apply because the rule of our law would override all of it in any case?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the primacy of our national domestic law in that context.

The review was published by the Government in 2018, with the Council of Europe calling the recommendations “a major step towards a solution”. The review found evidence of a range of practices across sharia councils, both positive and negative, and made three recommendations, which have been touched upon. Some of them mirror, or are very similar to, the UK-specific proposals set out in the Council of Europe resolution. I will run through them, as other hon. Members have, and respond on behalf of the Government.

The review’s first recommendation was to amend marriage law to ensure that civil marriages are conducted before, or at the same time, as the Islamic marriage ceremony, thereby establishing the right to a civil divorce and to financial protection on divorce. The law already provides the option to solemnise a legally valid Islamic marriage if it takes place in a mosque registered for worship and for marriage, as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East mentioned. However, we understand and appreciate that many Muslims choose to marry at home and, as the hon. Member for Bradford West said, may be unaware that that means that their ceremony, while religiously recognised, is not recognised under national law.

We will continue to engage with key stakeholders, including faith groups, academics and lawyers, to test their views on the policy and the legal challenges of limited reform relating to the law on marriage and religious ceremonies. I am keen for us to make as rapid progress as possible, but as the tenor of this debate has shown and as hon. Members will recognise, this is a sensitive area that involves the expression of religious freedom, so it is important that we get any changes right.

With respect to the current marriage law, the second recommendation proposed developing programmes to raise awareness among Muslim couples that Islamic
mariages do not afford them the legal protection that comes with a civil marriage—a point that the hon. Lady made very powerfully. The cross-Government integrated communities action plan, which is led by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, commits to supporting awareness campaigns to educate and inform couples and their children of the benefits of having a civil marriage alongside a religious marriage. The plan is a powerful opportunity to drive our vision for integrated communities in the UK. As the Prime Minister has said, we will use it to proudly promote the many values that unite us, including democracy, free speech, human rights and the rule of law—values that allow us to enjoy our individual freedoms and lead varied lives in diverse communities.

The third recommendation proposed regulating sharia councils by creating a state-established body with a code of practice for the councils to adopt and implement. The review team’s failure to reach a unanimous agreement on that proposal demonstrates the complexity of the issues involved. The Government consider that a state-facilitated or endorsed regulation scheme for such councils could confer on them a degree of legitimacy as alternative forms of dispute resolution and risk introducing what might be perceived as a parallel system of law. As the then Home Secretary set out at the time, the Government do not consider it an appropriate role of the state to act in that way.

**Naz Shah:** Does the Minister agree that the role that the Government have to play in these communities, as in any communities, is to support them in getting to where they need to be with sharia councils to make them compliant with our existing laws on non-discrimination regardless of gender?

**Edward Argar:** The hon. Lady makes an important point. I believe that the Government have an obligation in a range of areas to do what we can to ensure that all bodies and organisations comply with our national laws. She is right that it is incumbent on us all to encourage compliance with the laws that we make in this House.

The Home Office review found some evidence of sharia councils in England and Wales forcing women to make concessions to gain a divorce, of inadequate safeguarding policies and of a failure to signpost applicants to legal remedies. That is clearly not acceptable, as the hon. Lady made clear in her speech. Where sharia councils exist, they must abide by the law. Legislation is in place to protect the rights of women and prevent discriminatory practice; the Government will work with the appropriate regulatory authorities to ensure that that legislation and the protections that it establishes are being enforced fully and effectively.

The Council of Europe’s resolution calls on the UK authorities to do more to “remove the barriers to Muslim women’s access to justice…step up measures to provide protection and assistance to those who are in a situation of vulnerability…conduct further research on the ‘judicial’ practice of Sharia councils and on the extent to which such councils are used voluntarily, particularly by women, of whom many would be subject to intense community pressure in this respect.”

The Government are clear that we must do more to support people in faith communities to make informed choices about how to live their lives. Key to that is our work on integration and on a shared understanding of British values and the system of law that underpins them. My colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will consider those points further as work progresses on the integrated communities action plan.

**Naz Shah:** The Minister mentions British values again. Does he agree with my view as a Muslim woman that there is no conflict at all between my Muslim values and British values?

**Edward Argar:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that point. I believe that our values, which include the rule of law and the belief in human rights and democracy, are shared throughout our whole country, irrespective of people’s background, gender, age or religion.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley again for giving us the opportunity to debate these important issues. I assure him that what he and other hon. Members have said today has been heard, and that my colleagues across Government and I will consider carefully all the points that have been raised on all sides.

I conclude by repeating what I said at the beginning of my speech: many British people of different faiths benefit a great deal from the guidance that their religious codes, beliefs and practices offer. Such values allow us to enjoy our individual freedoms and lead varied lives in the diverse communities that are a hallmark of our country, but that has to happen within a framework in which citizens can share and respect common rights and responsibilities as they share in the benefits of living in this great country. There is, and remains, one rule of law in the United Kingdom, democratically enacted by this Parliament and the devolved Administrations, and applied by our independent judicial system.

Today’s important debate has been conducted in a manner that does credit to this House, which those who watch our proceedings may not always think is the case. It has been a very worthwhile way of spending our afternoon.

**John Howell:** Once again, may I express my gratitude to all Members who stayed for this debate, especially the three Front-Bench Members? It has been very useful. I said earlier that sharia councils should in no way be abolished, and that they provide a useful function in Muslim communities. I stick by that—they certainly do. However, there are two issues that I think we all agree are important. The first is the protection and empowerment of women; I am as keen that that should happen as any Member of this House, and a lot of my remarks were directed towards ensuring that it does. The second issue is human rights, which the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) mentioned and to which, as a delegate to the Council of Europe, I am absolutely committed. I pointed out how differences in human rights approaches have been raised in the Council of Europe; if we had the time, we could go through the situation in all the countries that the Council has looked at.
I am grateful to hon. Members for their participation and their help in raising this important subject. I agree that it is very sensitive, but that does not mean that we should not raise it or talk about it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered Sharia law courts in the UK.

4.18 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 May 2019

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

Women Human Rights Defenders

11.30 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the work of women human rights defenders globally.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Members who co-sponsored its application. It is fantastic to have support from six other political parties that are also committed to defending the human rights of women across the globe.

This House recognises and celebrates the contribution of women around the world to promote and protect human rights, the rights of individual women, their families and their communities. The Government need to be fully behind that, which I hope the Minister will confirm.

As we celebrate the centenary of women’s suffrage in the UK, we are reminded that suffragists and suffragettes were the forerunners of modern-day women human rights defenders. Thanks to them, we secured equal voting rights, the right to stand for parliament, the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, which are rights and freedoms that we all too often take for granted.

Women human rights defenders are at the forefront of the battle for human rights globally. From India and South Africa, where thousands have taken to the streets to protest against endemic sexual violence, to Saudi Arabia and Iran, where women activists risk arrest to resist the driving ban and forced hijab; from Ecuador, where Amazonian women face reprisals for trying to protect the rainforest, to Colombia, where women are demanding inclusion in the political process and enforcing the historic peace process; and in London, where thousands of women took to the streets last year to protest against the misogyny that is still rife throughout our society, the reality of which is sadly epitomised by the utterances of the current incumbent of the White House.

I am immensely proud of the human rights defenders in my constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green: Deborah Coles, the Director of Inquest and author of “Dying on the Inside: Examining Women’s Deaths in Prison”; Samantha Smethers, the influential chief executive of the Fawcett Society; and Sajda Mughal, the director of the JAN Trust, which specialises in ethnic minority women’s empowerment and families combating extremism.

Women’s activism is recognised as key to development. Evidence shows that women’s movements have been the most significant factor in securing legislation on violence against women around the world. The burgeoning power of women’s voices cannot be overstated. We need women involved in all aspects if we are to address key challenges such as the gender pay gap and enabling women—many of whom are the heads of households—into business and, crucially, ensuring that they keep the profits of their labour. There are some really good examples of what the Government are doing to support women who are heads of households in developing countries, where micro-loans allow women to run their own businesses, from which they get to keep the profits and look after their own families without having to share the profits with men in the household who may not share that purpose.

Women who stand up and speak out face unprecedented levels of repression and abuse in response, because of both their activism and their gender. Women human rights defenders defy societal expectations of what women should and should not do and of what spaces they should occupy. We must recognise not only the achievements of women defenders, but the grave challenges that they face for speaking out.

Next week, 15 May marks a year of detention for the women activists in Saudi Arabia who successfully led the campaign for the right to drive. While Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman took the credit for introducing that right, the very women who brought it about find themselves behind bars instead of behind the wheel. Those incredibly brave women, who have been detained for months with no charge and—as reported by Amnesty International—face torture, including sexual abuse and electric shocks, at the hands of the authorities, have paid high prices for their peaceful actions to realise the rights of all women in Saudi Arabia.

Like the suffragettes in the UK, who were women from all walks of life, women human rights defenders are ordinary people doing extraordinary work. They could be farmers, doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, journalists, or families of victims. They work in their communities to push for progress, defend people and their rights, and stand up to tyranny. Marielle Franco, who campaigned tirelessly in support of minority rights and against police brutality in Brazil was, tragically, murdered in March 2018. Azza Soliman is a lawyer who, for many years, supported women who experienced domestic and sexual violence in Egypt. She was arrested, banned from travelling, had her assets frozen and was accused of dishonouring the nation for speaking the truth on the violence that women face. I note, in that particular circumstance, the combination of silencing a woman and freezing her assets. We must recognise that having access to funds often allows women to speak out. Vitalina Koval, an LGBTI rights activist in Ukraine, was physically attacked for organising Pride marches.

Women human rights defenders drive change in their communities, but are under attack, and face imprisonment, travel bans, restrictions on funding, reprisals against their families, surveillance, smear campaigns and even enforced disappearances, death sentences, extrajudicial executions and murder. All around the world, women are fighting for progress and refuse to be silenced, whatever the cost. They are on the frontline as critical agents of change in their communities and countries, and must be recognised and celebrated as such. They need more than just our words; they need action. They need the international community to call for their release when they are imprisoned, to offer protection when they are threatened, to demand justice when impunity prevails, to fund them when they are impoverished, and, above all, to listen to them when others wish to silence them.
The UK should be at the forefront of the response to that global backlash, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the sensible thing to do. Women and other defenders on the ground can deliver change on media freedom, modern slavery, the rule of law and other UK Government priorities. We must recognise that in our globalised world, we are all connected—the unnoticed restrictions and abuses of those who speak out somewhere else today can happen here tomorrow.

As women in this House know, women who raise their voices in this country can also face a backlash. Online harassment and abuse of women, particularly on social media platforms, is rampant. Amnesty has shown that a woman receives a toxic tweet on Twitter every 30 seconds, and women from ethnic, religious and sexual identity minorities are even likelier to receive abuse. The same study reveals that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) receives over a third of such abuse. She shattered the glass ceiling for black and minority ethnic women in 1987 and, over thirty years later, she is bombarded hourly with the most horrific racist and misogynist abuse.

We in the UK cannot ignore what is happening around the world. We must challenge what happens, whether in Egypt, Ukraine, Brazil or Saudi Arabia, in the knowledge that we are not only supporting the voices of change there, but protecting the voices of change everywhere.

Will the Minister confirm his Department's commitment to promote and protect women human rights defenders globally, in recognition of the unprecedented surge in attacks against them? That should start with a new strategy to support and protect human rights defenders—I am surprised that such a strategy does not already exist, but today is an opportunity to start that process—and will ensure that women human rights defenders are given particular consideration, in recognition of all that they do in the UK and in every country around the world.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Evans. Women human rights defenders are on the frontline of achieving positive change around the world. From #MeToo to #TimesUp, women are pushing back against hundreds of years of misogyny and oppression.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, I will highlight the role of women human rights defenders in West Papua. They are mainly women who leave West Papua to study outside the country, due to the fact that the stories of women human rights defenders in West Papua are still hidden because of the oppression that they face daily.

I want to talk about Jenny Munro of the University of Queensland and her work on the subjugation of and violence directed against Papuan women street sex workers in highlands Papua, in particular by the Indonesian military. Her work describes co-ordination between the health sector and the military to force women to undergo HIV testing and medical treatment irrespective of the need for such medical interventions. Jenny's work also describes some of the living conditions of young women who end up doing street sex work as the result of complicated social circumstances, as happens elsewhere in the world, and it highlights the experience of women who return home to Papua after testing positive for HIV.

West Papua faces the highest prevalence of HIV in Indonesia—admitted by the Indonesian Ministry of Health in 2014—and is the only part of Indonesia to be experiencing a generalised epidemic. In 2013, HIV prevalence among indigenous Papuans was officially estimated at 2.9%, while the prevalence among non-indigenous migrants was 0.4%. Health officials estimate that just one in five cases of HIV have been detected, and fewer than one in 10 of those people receive treatment. HIV prevalence is highest among youth aged 15 to 24 and among Papuans living in remote and rural areas. The prevalence of HIV among pregnant women, detected during antenatal screening, ranged from 2% to 6%, a much higher percentage. The data suggest that West Papuans face the most rapid increase in HIV prevalence anywhere in the world.

Similar to men diagnosed with HIV, the women in West Papua experience stigma and ostracism at the community level. However, because women's position is more precarious to begin with, due to patriarchal values in which women overall are subordinate to male standards of behaviour, they are more likely than men to end up ostracised from their communities. That leads to a complicated management of secrets in order to remain within a supportive family network. Jenny Munro has also done some excellent recent work on young Papuan women who leave West Papua to study outside the province, and on the challenges that they face to complete their education when confronted by discrimination on the lines of gender and race—Papuans are Melanesians, rather than having the same ethnic origins as other Indonesians.

I raise this issue because, without Jenny's work as a human rights defender, the systemic oppression and exploitation of West Papuan women would be hidden, and the extent of the utilisation of West Papuans by the Indonesian military and the high price in terms of their health and wellbeing would be kept secret. We would otherwise never know what was happening to women in West Papua—being forced into the sex trade to have unprotected sex, often contracting HIV.

Jenny is one of those people who work in an area of oppression or occupation where local conditions are so degraded that it needs women from the rest of the world to speak up for it and to give the people their voice, so that they can be heard here. This is the first time that any Parliament has heard about that particular aspect of the West Papuan occupation, and that is down to Jenny's work, of which I was made aware in the weeks leading up to this debate.

I call on the Minister to do more to support women human rights defenders in West Papua and in other occupied territories. The sustainable development goals recognise the vital role of human rights defenders, including women, in contributing to progress. The Minister could do more to support women human rights defenders campaigning on the HIV/AIDS epidemic in West Papua and its causes under sustainable development goals 3 on good health and wellbeing, 5 on gender equality, 8 on inclusive growth and decent work, 10 on reducing inequality and 16 on access to justice. I will not labour the point, because tomorrow we have a debate in this Chamber on human rights in West Papua and I will use that opportunity to expand on how I see the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's role in safeguarding human rights in West Papua.
11.44 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I thank my constituents who wrote to me about the issue and encouraged me to come along to make a contribution. For them, it is very important for the human rights of women to be defended, particularly those of women trying to defend and protect other women. The UK Government must do all within their power to take action to protect those women and to ensure that all those countries with which the UK has diplomatic contact are left with no illusion as to the UK’s position on the matter. I am sure that the Minister will respond to some of that in his speech later.

It is easy for me as a woman to stand in this place. It is relatively easy for women in this country to stand up and give voice on whatever societal ills they wish to speak up about. However, when I come into this building, I am acutely aware that many women around the world do not have that level of privilege—nowhere near it. In many countries, for people to speak out can be to sign their own death warrant, or to lose everything they hold dear. The risks of doing so are incredibly profound. Women are not able to speak out in that way without risking their families and homes.

I encourage the Minister to speak out, particularly to those regimes that are often found wanting on human rights, especially Saudi Arabia, which has not done nearly enough to change its behaviour. The most recent executions did not involve women, but they were of people who could not defend themselves properly under that regime. Where we see persecution of men, persecution of women will be doubled or trebled in severity, because women there do not even get the chance to speak out.

As the Minister knows, I have some involvement in Yemen through the all-party group on Yemen. Recently, I was pleased to meet some women campaigners who visited London. They were able to tell me more about their situation and how difficult it was to tell their stories, or even to get out of Yemen to come here and give us their testimony. It seems a lot easier for men to get to London and to make representations to groups or in front of Ministers, but if women’s voices are not heard—if women cannot even get out of their countries to give their testimony—their stories will not be told, and we will not hear about the disproportionate impact on women.

The World Economic Forum studied 146 countries and found that, of all of them, women in Yemen came last. They had among the worst circumstances in the world, and the war in Yemen over the past few years has only made that worse. In such situations, women seem to make more sacrifices than men—the cause of women and girls’ education in Yemen has gone backwards, as women are married off younger in order to get a bit of security for their families and their own lives.

Women in Yemen are compromised not only in education but in health services, because they cannot access such services without a male relative or because those services have been lost in the war—attacked in air strikes—and it is not safe for women to get to the hospitals, let alone to get the treatment they so desperately need. As for women working in those services, many civil servants in Yemen have not been paid for a considerable time, so the women cannot work to bring money into their families. They therefore cannot defend other women who desperately need health services, particularly for maternal health.

When talking about women’s voices, I ask the Minister to consider who is around the table in his meetings when he goes to and engages with other countries. Are women allowed to go to such meetings? Are they allowed to give voice to the issues that they might wish to raise? Are they able to give a full account, or are they being screened away by the men with the power? Will he consider that in relation to his meetings and the groups he is meeting? Where are the women in such conversations, and are they present and able to give voice to their concerns?

I also want to remark on women in this country who have come from other countries to claim asylum. In my casework, I encounter women who have been trafficked or come here under some kind of coercion—I can think of one woman who came here as a married woman but came out as gay when she got here, because it felt safer here—but all such things are often counted against them in the immigration process and in their asylum interviews. I sat in on that particular woman’s asylum interview, and the Home Office official said, “Well, you lied about your sexuality to your husband, so you must be lying here today. How can we say that you are not?” Women need to be believed—their stories and testimonies must be believed. In a lot of circumstances, for a woman to be able to tell her story, she has come through a hell of a lot to get there in the first place. Telling that story in front of her husband, her children or whoever it happens to be—in front of a male person from the Home Office—can be incredibly traumatic. A lot of the women I see in my surgery have not been believed but should be. I believe them very much when they tell me their stories.

I would like the Minister to pass on to his Home Office colleagues that when women have been trafficked to this country in difficult circumstances, we should do everything in our power to make sure that they have sanctuary and safety here, even if they could not feel safe in the country they came from.

11.50 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for securing this important debate on women’s work to defend human rights globally, and for pointing out, in her well-informed and comprehensive speech, the importance of the path set by the suffragettes in the UK to secure votes for women.

In the spirit of celebrating human rights defenders, as this debate seeks to do, I want to pay tribute to the fact that across the world, as we have heard, ordinary women commit acts of great self-sacrifice in the face of persistent abuse, threats to personal safety, persecution and violence, simply for standing up for what is right. All of us who believe in human rights, certainly in all western democracies, have a duty to stand shoulder to shoulder with those women and do all we can to support them. All states that believe in freedom should use every diplomatic means and avenue at their disposal to secure human rights for all—no ifs, no buts.

We should support all women who stand up for human rights in countries where women are seen as mere chattels—the legal property of their closest male relatives—such as in Saudi Arabia. Women all around the world are denied their basic human rights simply because they are women. We need to talk about that and learn more
about it. I learned much from listening to the speech by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) about the situation in West Papua.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green referred to the appalling situation in Saudi Arabia. So-called wrongdoing in such regimes, such as women’s campaigning to be permitted to learn to drive, is sufficient to put one’s life in danger. We who believe in freedom must have the courage to stand up to those regimes and to support women, instead of turning a blind eye. We talk much in the west about the contribution of women to support women, instead of turning a blind eye. We must have the courage to stand up to those regimes and to put one’s life in danger. We who believe in freedom campaigning to be permitted to learn to drive, is sufficient So-called wrongdoing in such regimes, such as women’s rights. Some were detained incommunicado, and they can be cruelly treated and imprisoned. Go out unless they are accompanied by their male owners, and they can be cruelly treated and imprisoned for having the temerity to hope to be seen as individuals in their own right, rather than the possession of a man. We must not be silent about that in the name of cultural sensitivities. When we are silent in the face of others being repressed, we become a friend of the oppressor, or perhaps even a useful idiot for the oppressor if we continue relations with that state as though it were not a tyrannical regime. That simply will not do.

There is deep concern about reports of the torture and ill treatment of detained women’s rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. They have been imprisoned since mid-2018 solely for peacefully campaigning for the protection and promotion of human rights, including women’s rights. Some were detained incommunicado, with no access to their families or lawyers during the first three months of their detention, and were subjected to chilling smear campaigns by state media. They all remain without access to legal representation.

Recent reports have emerged that some of the detained women activists have been subjected to electric shocks, floggings, sexual threats and other forms of torture. Testimonies recount that the abuse has left some of the women unable to walk or stand properly, with uncontrolled shaking and marks on their bodies. At least one of them has attempted suicide on several occasions. Those women have long been advocating for Saudi women’s right to drive, have called for an end to the discriminatory male guardianship system and have long campaigned for greater respect for human rights. For that, they risk being tried and sentenced before the specialised criminal court, the country’s counter-terrorism court.

In 2016 the United Nations Committee Against Torture, in its second periodic report on Saudi Arabia, expressed concern at the application of terrorism legislation through the specialised criminal court, which enables the criminalisation of acts of peaceful expression considered as “endangering national unity” or “undermining the reputation or position of the State”. Those regulations have been used to try human rights defenders for exercising their fundamental rights. They violate international standards for the right to a fair trial and have enabled the authorities to detain individuals without providing them with access to legal representation during the investigation phase.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women further recommended in March 2018 that the Saudi state should facilitate women’s access to justice and institutionalise legal aid that is accessible, sustainable and responsive to the needs of women. If it were not so serious, it would be laughable that Saudi Arabia is a member of the UN Human Rights Council. As such, it is obligated to uphold the highest standards for the promotion and protection of human rights, and to co-operate fully with the Council’s mechanisms. However, the Saudi Government have been largely unco-operative with the Council and continue to exhibit a flagrant disregard for fundamental freedoms.

My concern is that the international community seeks to stay on good terms with this rich and powerful regime at any cost, and the Saudi Prince knows that. Where is the motivation for Saudi Arabia to care about international opinion? I urge the Minister and the UK Government to lead attempts to bring pressure to bear on the Saudi Government to persuade them that their action is simply incompatible with civilised, modern codes of behaviour. Halting UK arms sales to a country that deals in terror, killing and oppression would be a good start. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), that would immediately benefit the people of Yemen.

It is worth noting that the Saudi Government require visiting reporters to be accompanied by a Government minder. That really says it all. I want to challenge the UK Minister to urge the UK Government to lead support for all women human rights defenders in the international community, as pointed out by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central pointed out, our constituents really care about these matters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise for being late—my plane was delayed and I ran the whole way here, so I am still catching my breath. Women have been at the forefront of the defence of human rights for many years, such as Maud Kells from Northern Ireland, who has spent 50 years providing maternity care for Congolese women, even after she was shot by a bandit while in the mission. The women she helped should have women like her deserve recognition and the utmost respect. That is what this debate is all about: giving women the recognition that they rightly deserve.
Patricia Gibson: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is amazing that such women are ordinary women, who are doing extraordinary things in some of the most barbaric conditions and regimes.

Women human rights defenders not only face the challenges and attacks suffered by male human rights defenders, but suffer more due to the historical and structural inequalities in power relations and discrimination. They suffer heightened risks and acts of violence because of their gender and the specific, often marginalised, human rights issues they work on. For example, women human rights defenders are more likely to experience sexualised smear campaigns, sexual assault and rape, including at police stations. Targeting of their children also takes place. There is also sometimes marginalisation within their own movements and communities, which must be extremely difficult to bear.

That is why this debate is important. We cannot forget—we must not forget—the struggles and risks faced by women human rights defenders. They stand up to repression, barbarity and cruelty every single day, risking everything to have the kinds of rights and freedoms that we in the west take for granted. They must not be forgotten, no matter how rich, powerful or important the state perpetrating the oppression happens to be. It is right that we celebrate them, salute their courage and stand beside them in their struggle. I look forward to hearing how the Minister intends to put the UK at the forefront of those efforts.

12 noon

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for bringing this important debate to the House and for her comprehensive introduction to the subject. She gave a thorough guide to women’s activism worldwide and at home—from women campaigning against a Saudi driving ban, to the protests against the utterances of the incumbent of the White House. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—they are a small but select group, as might be expected at this time of day following a break. No Westminster Hall debate would be complete without an intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I thank him for that.

As we have heard, women human rights defenders around the world work tirelessly to challenge violence against women, to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights, and to create economic justice for women. While women doing that work face the same threats as other human rights defenders, including surveillance, false charges and violence, they also face, as I think every Member has said, threats due to their gender.

Women human rights defenders encounter intensified threats when their work challenges male dominance in society. Michel Forst, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, highlighted that when he presented his report to the Human Rights Council. He said:

“In the current political climate, in which there is a backlash against human rights, women who defend and promote rights are often the first to come under attack”.

His report shows how the rise in misogynistic, sexist and homophobic speech by political leaders in recent years has normalised violence against women human rights defenders. In some cases, those acting on behalf of states have engaged in direct attacks against women defenders and their families.

The special rapporteur’s report said:

“In many countries, women who dare to speak out for human rights are stigmatised and called bad mothers, terrorists or witches, silenced and marginalised from decision making and can even be killed. It is particularly worrying that the hostility they face comes not only from state authorities, but also the media, social movements, their own communities and even their family...Public shaming, attacks on women’s human rights reports...publishing their personal details on the internet, sexual violence and attacks against their children and loved ones are used to silence women human rights defenders”.

The report notes that women face the same risks as men defending human rights, but it makes it clear that women defenders face additional and different threats that are shaped by entrenched gender stereotypes and ingrained social perceptions of women. The special rapporteur stated:

“We have documented how the obstacles and risks faced by women human rights defenders are shaped by their gender. Women are attacked for promoting and protecting human rights simply because of their identity as women and because of what they do”.

The report raises alarm about the increasing number of states that have been restricting civil society space and imposing legal and administrative requirements that curtail the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, association and peaceful assembly. In some countries, women’s human rights defenders have been targeted for promoting women’s human rights, including the right to equality and to sexual and reproductive health.

The special rapporteur expressed serious concern at the increasing use of the concept of gender ideology, which is presented in various parts of the world, and especially in Latin America and eastern Europe, as an attempt by feminists and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights defenders to destabilise the social and political order. He stressed:

“There are no short cuts to reversing this deplorable situation. We must dismantle harmful gender stereotypes and radically reimagine social constructs of gender to prevent the domination and marginalisation of women...States and international organisations must recognise the specific challenges and risks women defenders face. They must ensure that such defenders are recognised, supported and enabled to participate equally, meaningfully and powerfully in the promotion and protection of human rights”.

It is also important to mention UN Security Council resolution 1325, which highlights the importance of women’s voices and involvement in achieving and keeping peace. In 2000, the Security Council formally acknowledged through the creation of resolution 1325 the changing nature of warfare, with civilians increasingly targeted and women continuing to be excluded from participation in peace processes. The resolution specifically addresses how women and girls are differentially impacted by conflict and war and recognises the critical role that women can and already do play in preventing and ending conflict. It affirms that peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in preventing violent conflict, delivering relief and recovery efforts, and forging lasting peace.

Each of the resolution’s mandates relates to one of the four basic pillars of participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. Participation calls for increased
participation of women at all levels of decision making, including in national, regional and international institutions; in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict; in peace negotiations; in peace operations, as soldiers, police, and civilians; and as special representatives of the UN Secretary-General. Protection calls specifically for the protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, including in emergency and humanitarian situations such as refugee camps. Prevention calls for improving intervention strategies in the prevention of violence against women, including by prosecuting those responsible for violations of international law, strengthening women's rights under national law, and supporting local women's peace initiatives and conflict resolution processes. Relief and recovery calls for the advancement of relief and recovery measures to address international crises through a gendered lens, including by respecting the civilian and humanitarian nature of refugee camps and considering the needs of women and girls in the design of refugee camps and settlements.

ActionAid UK has demanded that Governments and donors urgently scale up efforts and resources to support the leadership of women human rights defenders and to protect their rights, and cease to condone the rise in violence, whether through harmful action or no action at all. It asks the UK Government to recognise, champion and prioritise women human rights defenders and to support and increase resources to protect the rights of civil society, including women's rights organisations and defenders.

The UK Government should defend those rights and hold Governments and other powerful actors to account, and they should actively resist and challenge reversals of women's sexual and reproductive health rights by Governments within the UN and other key global policy forums. They should introduce mandatory gender-sensitive human rights due diligence for UK companies to ensure that they identify, prevent and mitigate rights violations in their supply chains and linked to their activities, including against women human rights defenders who are challenging abuse. They should also permit access to effective remedy, in line with UN guidelines on business and human rights.

Amnesty International has asked the UK Government to hold meaningful consultations with women human rights defenders in the development of their foreign policy and development programmes. Importantly, we should recognise the vital role of defenders in contributing to progress on the sustainable development goals, especially goal 5 on gender equality and goal 16 on access to justice. I fully support those asks of the UK Government, and would be interested to hear the Minister's view on that.

In December last year, Lord Ahmad announced at an event to mark Human Rights Day that Foreign and Commonwealth Office internal guidance on supporting human rights defenders would be made public, which is welcome. Will the Minister confirm when that guidance will be made public, as promised in December last year?

In conclusion, if we want to make the world better for women and girls, we must acknowledge and celebrate those who defend women's human rights every day. We must defend the defenders.
rights defenders who are currently in detention in Saudi Arabia, and asked for them to be given due process, for allegations of torture to be properly, fully, publicly and independently investigated, and for those responsible for any alleged abuse to be prosecuted. British Embassy officials have continued to request to observe each and every trial session and have unfailingly, quietly behind the scenes, advocated the importance of the right to freedom of speech and a fair trial. Sadly, however, many of those women remain in jail facing unclear charges.

Women are also exposed to particular risks by virtue of being women. Those range from sexual abuse and harassment—several Members have raised that issue—to domestic abuse and hostility in the workplace. In such circumstances, it takes even more courage, strength and resilience to stand up to the powerful.

Catherine West: What is the proposed action if Saudi Arabia does not comply with the discussions through the back channels? Such discussions are correct and part of diplomacy, but we are facing a crisis. What could be done differently to promote a just solution for not just women but all those facing human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia—a country with which we do so much business?

Mark Field: If I may, I will say a little more about that later. I hope the hon. Lady will appreciate that the Floor of the Chamber is probably not the right place for me to make up policy on the hoof, but there are clearly grave concerns, and perhaps I can write to her in due course to explain some of the steps we intend to take in that regard.

We are all proud of those women who stand up day after day, proving time and again that their words and work have a real impact in righting wrongs and creating a more equal and just society. It is therefore right to honour them in this debate, and the Government—indeed, I am sure, all Members of the House—unequivocally support them.

Protecting and promoting human rights is a cornerstone of our work in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, although it often means engaging in difficult conversations, both publicly and privately, with a variety of Governments with whom we have strong diplomatic relationships. We are fortunate to work with and support courageous women, such as Rebeca Gyumi, who succeeded in raising the legal age of marriage for boys and girls in Tanzania. In recognition for her work, she was awarded the UN human rights prize. She is still hard at work in Tanzania and working with the British high commission there.

In Jakarta, Indonesia, we used our Chevening alumni programme fund to raise awareness among young people about sexual harassment. The project implementer is a former Chevening scholar, who is now a prominent human rights defender and lawyer focusing particularly on gender and equality. She and tens of thousands of other women human rights defenders around the world dedicate their time, efforts and energy to helping others; they deserve our gratitude and support.

Throughout 2019, the UK will increase the transparency of our support for such human rights champions. We will work with like-minded partners—Governments, NGOs and others—around the globe to support and uphold human rights.

Patricia Gibson: We all have concerns about how Saudi Arabia treats women and human rights defenders. Given that we are aware of the barbarity of the Saudi regime—notably, that it appears to have no remorse about bombing innocent civilians in Yemen—is the Minister comfortable with the UK continuing to sell arms to such a blood-thirsty regime?

Mark Field: The situation in Yemen is far more complicated than the hon. Lady puts it. I could rehearse the issues that have resulted in the civil war in Yemen. As she is aware, there are the most rigorous arms control codes in place, which have been adhered to by all UK Governments for the last 20 years. All Ministers take the issue extremely seriously. I can assure her that there are opportunities, challenges and responsibilities in signing off any arms sales, and there are strict criteria, in UK and international law, to which we adhere.

I have talked about our bilateral work, but we also work multilaterally through the UN. The UK is working with partners to strengthen the resolve of the international community to support women human rights defenders. A year ago, we committed £1.6 million to support efforts to get more women participating in peace processes, as mediators and peace builders, across the Commonwealth. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) is right that that is an important part of the process. The UN is continually aware of the issue through Security Council resolution 1325. It is trying to raise interest across the globe and to create female advocates, who will make a real difference.

Working with partners means continuing to work with the many thousands of non-governmental organisations that share our human rights values and objectives, a number of whom have been referred to during the debate. They are the experts; it is their expertise and passion, alongside that of Governments, that helps to deliver change. They also support the human rights defenders on the frontline of human rights.

We are actively supporting women’s political participation because we recognise that political empowerment gives women the opportunity to share their views, to challenge the status quo and to make informed decisions. That is why women’s empowerment is at the heart of the Department for International Development’s latest “Strategic Vision for Gender Equality”, which was launched last year. That strategic vision aims to build gender equality from the ground up through the education, employment and empowerment of women and girls, including in conflict, crises and humanitarian emergencies.

Let me touch on the specific points that were brought up in the debate. I hope Members will forgive me if I do not fully answer all of them, and I will respond in writing if necessary. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green asked when the Government intend to publish a document setting out UK support for human rights defenders more transparent. We intend to help diplomatic staff in our embassies and high commissions to support human rights defenders. We have worked with NGOs to update the guidelines, and Lord Ahmad agreed in December to make UK support for human rights defenders more transparent. We intend to publish a document setting out UK support for human rights defenders in 2019, in consultation with NGOs. We hope to have something published within the next few months, but I am sure the hon. Member for
Heywood and Middleton will remind me about it later in the year if we have not had a final publication. We will be as transparent as we can be, but Members will appreciate that parts of the toolkit involve sensitive discussion, and it would not be wise to publish the rules and regulations in their entirety.

I will be facing the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) again tomorrow, at the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) about West Papua. I know the subject is close to the hon. Gentleman’s heart, and I would not wish to belittle it; he has been passionate about it since his pre-parliamentary days, as he has made clear. I hope that debate will give us the opportunity to cover the situation in depth. He made some powerful points about particular female human rights defenders in West Papua.

I must confess that I have nothing specific to say in response to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I think she recognised that her concerns were more of an issue for the Home Office, so I will pass them on to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration and try to get that sorted out. On a personal note, the hon. Lady may be aware that one of my great British political heroes is Andrew Bonar Law, who was the Member for Glasgow Central in the days when it was a safe Conservative seat—I think the business folk had something to do with that. Ironically, during his time in the House, just over 100 years ago, the great debate was about women’s rights to vote. He was quite a liberal on that matter, although he went on to be a Conservative Prime Minister. I think he would have been proud that the hon. Lady is the first female Member of Parliament—the first of many, I am sure—for that historic seat in the centre of that great Scottish city.

I promised the hon. Members for Hornsey and Wood Green and for North Ayrshire and Arran that I would mention Saudi Arabia, and I will write to them if there are more specific points I can address. They asked what actions the Government are taking in regard to the continued detention of women human rights defenders. We are concerned about that situation in Saudi Arabia, and we are monitoring it closely. Concerns are consistently raised by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary when they deal with the Saudi authorities at the highest level. I will make similar representations. As the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green may be aware, I am also interim Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, so I will endeavour to raise these issues in future conversations with the Saudi ambassador to London.

Concerns have also been raised through the UN. The UK was a signatory to the joint statement published at the UN Human Rights Council on 7 March, which expressed significant concerns about the situation. We are deeply concerned about the allegations of torture and have raised that directly with the Saudi authorities. Saudi Arabia remains a Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights priority country, particularly because of the death penalty, its restrictions and clampdowns on women’s rights, and broader issues about freedom of expression, of assembly and of religion and belief.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton asked about business and human rights, and what we are doing to better human rights practices. We are committed to focusing on business and human rights through the promotion of the UN guiding principles. She is quite right to identify the importance that we rightly attach to issues around sustainable development goals 5 and 16. We also wish to utilise as many diplomatic skills as we can in relation to legislative and non-legislative measures to protect against, and provide remedies for, human rights abuses by business. The UK was proud to be the first country in the world to produce a national action plan responding to the UN guiding principles on this matter. We have since encouraged other states to draft their own national action plans. We were also the first country to produce an update to that plan, in 2016. We regard those guiding principles as the authoritative global standard for preventing and addressing the risks of adverse human rights impacts on business. We will continue to promote those principles.

Thank you for giving me a little leeway on time, Mr Evans. We have had a little time on our hands, and it is fair to say that, while the debate will not fully take up its 90 minutes, there is no lack of passion from those who are here. As the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton pointed out, the debate is on the first day back after a break, when people are making their way back to London, and that has affected the quantity of debate, if not its quality.

We have heard practical examples of the ways in which women human rights defenders can and do transform lives. That is why we should all be proud that the UK remains committed to helping women all over the world to feel safe and protected in the work they do, so that they can speak freely and be part of the change we all want. I speak for not just the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but, I hope, everyone in Parliament when I say that we want a world in which all people are treated with fairness and dignity, and in which those fighting to improve human rights can do so without fear of discrimination, violence or retaliation. Let us take all our inspiration from women such as Sara Landeros. If she is determined to keep fighting on for that better world, we must do the same. The Government and, I am sure, Parliament are committed to doing that.
Shadow Minister—I note that the Government have only one woman on their Foreign Office Front-Bench team, but we live in hope that more will be appointed. There is an opportunity now, as the Minister is currently doing two jobs. Perhaps a woman could do one of them for him. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton spoke about UN Security Council resolution 1325, the importance of the picture of conflict, and how much more at risk women human rights defenders are in those conflicts. She mentioned the need to design refugee camps specially to protect women. Often it is women human rights defenders in the camps who make the case for that, in Yemen or in Libya, where there are terrible detention camps for refugees fleeing conflict in Africa.

The lives of many girls and women are phenomenally disrupted by conflict, which changes things for them very much, but out of that, occasionally, wonderful women leaders might arise, to be part of the excellent programme now being put in place by the UN under resolution 1325. That work involves promoting women in human rights as part of the peace process, and putting the case for them to be at the table, as my hon. Friend said. Then there will be women who are able to express, in a unique way, with passion and clarity, what other women face in difficult situations around the world.

I hope that we can have a further debate once the principles of the human rights picture are put forward by the FCO.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered celebrating the work of women human rights defenders globally.

12.34 pm

Sitting suspended.
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Lady is pointing out challenges with universal credit. Does she agree that digital exclusion is already becoming a significant problem under universal credit? Many disadvantaged people do not have access to a computer or the internet, and even if they do, the application process is very difficult for them. Does the hon. Lady not think that the Minister should ensure that implied consent is part of the universal credit system, to rectify some of the problems?

Danielle Rowley: The hon. Lady is right: there are many issues with this system, and digital exclusion is a huge one.

Since obtaining the deflection script documents, I have had discussions with a former case manager on the helpline, Mr Tarpley. I talked with him about how the leaked script comes across, and he explained to me that really it only hinted at how much it was expected of call handlers to deflect people online. He explained to me that if someone called and asked to make a change over the phone, they would be told no by default. No matter what reason the caller gave, whether disability, bereavement or lack of digital skills, they would always be asked the same questions: “Do you have a mobile device?”, “Do you have any friends or family who can help?” and “Can you get to the library?” Call handlers would be told to explain that there are computers at the jobcentre that can be used for free, but I have heard from constituents that often, when the jobcentre is very busy, that is not the case; they are not able to access that help.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister knows about these issues, because I have written to him about them. Does the hon. Lady agree that, given the murky way in which universal credit is worked out, with staff members often not even having access to the payment plan, people being expected to hold on for hours on the phone for the information and then being told that there is no information is not acceptable? Does she agree that perhaps the Minister should be looking at ensuring that staff members are trained to the standard necessary to enable people to get the answers that they need, at the time that they need them?

Danielle Rowley: That is a very important point. I will come on to staff and training.

The burden on the staff is a significant point as well. Bayard Tarpley told me:

“We were trained to never help callers on the phone unless it was going to lead to a manager call or complaint. If you did make the change, there was a risk of failing a ‘CEF’ check, in which a manager would listen to the call and rate it based on several elements of the call, with ‘following the deflection script’ being part of that criteria’.

Staff are being marked against deflecting people online. Some of that may now have changed, likely because of media coverage and pressure, but given the Government’s absolute lack of transparency on this issue, it is unclear what has changed, how much has changed and when changes have happened or are likely to happen, so I hope that the Minister will be clear today about those changes.

It is astounding that the Government thought that this was an appropriate strategy in the first place, and it raises very serious questions about how little consideration is given to the people’s experiences. I imagine that, in his response, the Minister might point to some of the different training that call handlers receive to assess and deal with vulnerable callers, but I have been told first hand that although call handlers are trained to do certain things, that does not necessarily happen in practice. How much of the training is actually being implemented by managers, or are managers being told to do things differently? Are they being monitored?

When hearing about these strategies, it is no surprise that in many cases people have not received the support that they need from the helpline. That jeopardises and delays people’s payments and financial stability, at times with significant implications for their mental and physical health. That is something that I see and that other hon. Members here today will often see with constituents in their offices.

Earlier this year, I spoke to Sky News about the deflection scripts that were shown to me by whistleblowers, and it covered the issue. Sky News also highlighted the case of Brian. He was put on universal credit at the beginning of 2018. In July, he died by suicide. He was 59. His daughter Leann spoke to Sky News and said:

“He couldn’t understand the system from the very start. He was told to go online and access his journal but he didn’t have a clue about the internet. He was constantly ringing up and asking for advice but was told to go online. It really got him down.”

When she saw the deflection script, she could not believe that was happening, but it rang true given the experience that her father had had.

A constituent of mine used the helpline after questions in his journal went unanswered; the online system had seemed to fail him. He was asking, for example, why the money that he was entitled to was not coming through. On the multiple times that he called, he was told that his inquiry would be passed on and he would be phoned back. That did not happen. When contacting the UC helpline, the shortest hold time that he experienced was 20 minutes and the longest 42 minutes. That has been backed up by Citizens Advice, which has found that at points the helpline has had an average waiting time of 39 minutes. My office has had to intervene for that constituent on three occasions, as well as for many others. My constituent believes that the problems would not have been resolved through his own efforts without such intervention. It cannot be right that people are only treated with the respect that they deserve and given what they are entitled to when an MP’s office or another agency intervenes. What happens to people who cannot get to an MP’s office or access that extra help? Bear in mind that these are some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

The ability to challenge decisions made on UC claims is particularly important. Recent research by the Child Poverty Action Group showed that one in five cases in a UC monitoring project involved administrative errors by the Department for Work and Pensions, resulting, for example, in a claimant being paid the wrong amount. The significant stress people face in not being able to manage the UC process has huge implications for family life.

Exactly three months ago today, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions essentially admitted to Sky News that deflection had been a strategy used by the universal credit helpline. She said:

“We’re going to make sure it’s absolutely clear in the future, there shouldn’t be a deflection script strategy and I have taken control to make sure that’s the case.”
Although I welcome that change, I have not heard anything since about changes that will be made. It seems that the issue has been swept under the carpet, so it is important that we get the answers today.

I have pursued the issue of deflection for months, primarily because of the significant implications for people’s lives of not being able to get help over the phone. Macmillan Cancer Support welfare rights advisers have reported that people with cancer are often being redirected online. They have also said that there is inadequate training for helpline staff to cope with the specific concerns of cancer patients. One cancer patient claimant said:

“When I phone the numbers that they give me, they say they can’t deal with it. I’ve phoned them three times. This is causing me more stress than the cancer.”

We cannot have a situation where trying to get the help that the Government should be providing is causing people more stress.

The Government have been evasive with me throughout the discussion on the use of deflection. They have fobbed off my freedom of information request and denied that deflection exists, even in the face of clear evidence. They have ensured that they have not admitted in the House that deflection is taking place. I am still waiting for a reply to my letter on this subject to the Secretary of State dated 5 February. We have had to rely on leaks and whistleblowers to find out that these tactics have been used and their effect on people’s lives. That lack of transparency seems to run throughout the system. The Child Poverty Action Group’s report concluded:

“The combination of poor decision making and a system that is not transparent about how decisions have been made is causing significant hardship in people’s lives.”

I want to make it clear before I finish that none of the criticisms of universal credit, the way it is handled or the helpline are aimed at staff. Frontline DWP staff have some of the toughest jobs. They are under intense pressure. I believe they have a genuine desire to help people. However, they are working in a broken system, which must be criticised, condemned and changed. Families are turning to food banks. Working people are struggling to pay the bills. People with severe disabilities are being left without vital support.

The general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents call centre workers, said:

“Our members would prefer to be given the resources and time to give a first class service to help claimants. However they are instructed to use this deflection script as a means to get people off the phones.

It is another example of a government who has failed to invest in staff and support claimants.”

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. The universal credit helpline is even more important because it is being used as back-up for journal entries, which are supposed to be the way that claimants are able to get questions answered during their claim. However, because it is the third trigger of the amount of work that staff have to do—after priorities zero, one and two—the helpline is picking up all these cases that should be answered by the journal, but there are just not enough staff to do that.

Danielle Rowley: My hon. Friend and other hon. Members—I am sad to see no Back-Bench Conservatives here—will be familiar with the experience of the journal letting people down, just like the helpline.

I have some questions for the Minister, which I hope he will answer. Will he take the opportunity to be clear about what happened in the Department leading to the development and implementation of a deflection script on the helpline? Will he apologise to claimants who have not received the support they deserve, often in times of great need, and to the whistleblowers on whom we have had to rely to expose these damaging practices?

Have any changes been made to the helpline since the Secretary of State said that there should not be a deflection-script strategy and that she had taken control to ensure that that was the case? If so, what changes have been made and what evaluation was carried out to inform those changes? When were those changes made, or when will they be made? What checks have been put in place to ensure that people receive the support that they need on the helpline and they are not deflected online? Does the Minister really believe that the helpline is sufficiently resourced and run, with the best interests of claimants in mind and staff being fully supported?

1.16 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

As we saw at the start, you are characteristically generous when dealing with colleagues. I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) for raising this issue—I know she cares deeply about it. She has written to me, and I apologise that my response has not arrived yet. I signed that letter yesterday, so I hope she will receive it in the next 24 hours. She has also raised this issue in parliamentary questions and, in February, at DWP oral questions, when I responded to her. I will come on to that.

I will begin by setting out where we are in terms of universal credit. Universal credit rolled out to all jobcentres across the country last year. We now have over 1.8 million people claiming this benefit. When we talk about support, it is worth pointing out that, over the last two Budgets, we have announced changes to universal credit worth an additional £6 billion—in particular to ensure that vulnerable claimants are supported in the transition to universal credit. That includes changes to work allowances worth an extra £1.7 billion a year. Those changes, which increase work allowances by £1,000, were brought in from April this year, providing a boost to the incomes of the lowest paid. That will result in 2.4 million families keeping an extra £630 per year of what they earn. I hope that underlines our learning and adapting approach.

We have always been clear that universal credit is primarily a digital service, which allows claimants to manage their own data and account online at a time that is convenient to them. Via their accounts, claimants can check their universal credit benefit payments, notify us of changes, and record notes via an online journal facility. Some activities still require a call from a claimant, as they are not yet automated, such as booking an appointment. The telephony channel remains an important part of our service offer.

The universal credit telephone helplines have been freephone numbers since the end of 2017. Claimants who call the universal credit helpline are connected directly to the person or team dealing with their case. We also have dedicated national service hubs, which provide telephony for third parties, such as landlords, welfare rights organisations and those citizens without a claim.
For those unable to access or use digital services—this is an important point—assistance to make and maintain their claim is available via the freephone universal credit helpline. The universal credit service centre will establish the best means of support for the claimant. We also provide comprehensive support for claimants who do not have digital skills or who do not have access to a computer. Support is provided in person in jobcentres and through the computers that are available for claimants to use, as well as through home visits for those unable to attend a jobcentre.

From April this year, we introduced a help to claim service delivered by Citizens Advice. This provides additional support for any claimant from point of entry to the first award of universal credit, and is available by phone, webchat and in person at local Citizens Advice outlets and jobcentres.

The hon. Lady asked about training. The DWP staff who service the universal credit helplines have a three-week facilitated learning period. That structured learning provides the skills and knowledge required to support them to answer claimants’ queries. For new universal credit helpline call handlers, the learning journey is broadly made up of soft skills such as customer service learning, which covers how to gather information through active listening; equality and diversity training; and bespoke IT system-based technical learning, all of which is supported by consolidation activity.

Colleagues receive ongoing learning in their roles alongside experienced case managers and have access to universal credit guidance, which is refreshed at regular intervals. We are committed to continuous improvement, and as part of that we regularly review call plans, service levels and intelligence to improve our offer and understand why claimants are calling.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister may know that a jobcentre employee described universal credit as like being in a leaky boat: a leak springs up, and someone sticks their finger in the hole, but then a new hole appears, and they end up sprawled across the boat trying to block all the leaks. The holes are not the problem though: it is the boat. The Minister will know that many people and many groups in civil society believe that universal credit should be paused. Will he think about pausing it so that all the holes in the boat can be fixed?

Alok Sharma: I gently say to the hon. Lady that I visit jobcentres, as do my ministerial colleagues, and that is not the feedback that we receive from people on the front line. In terms of pausing universal credit, we have been rolling it out across the country since December, and we have been clear that it will be the main welfare provision for the country in future.

To return to the universal credit helpline, when someone calls it they are presented with a series of options to select from. They are then put through to the agent best placed to answer their inquiry. All further triage is done through conversations to establish the claimant’s needs. There are 26 service centres across the country that aim to support people with their universal credit claim.

We have between 5,000 and 7,500 staff answering calls in our service centres to support our customers. An important point in terms of the statistics—I would not want any hon. Member to be in any doubt that we are making a big effort when it comes to supporting people over the phone—is that, in March, we answered about 1.3 million calls to the universal credit full service helpline.

The hon. Member for Midlothian talked about waiting times. In March, the average waiting time for a call to be answered was two minutes and 43 seconds. In February, the average duration of a call to the UC helpline was just over six minutes. I hope she will appreciate that it is not about rushing people off the lines but about providing support to them.

As I said earlier, the hon. Lady raised this issue in parliamentary questions on 11 February. I reiterate what I said to her then, which is that she has already been sent a copy of the universal credit digital channel document. She talked about FOI requests, but she already has that document, which is what DWP staff use as a guide when taking calls from claimants. She will be aware that the document says clearly that staff must use a common-sense and sensitive approach in resolving queries ahead of any digital discussion. Again, I want to be absolutely clear that there is no intention to deflect and there are no targets for getting claimants to use a digital channel.

The hon. Lady made several other points, including about supporting people who struggle with English or Welsh. We have an interpreting service available for those with language barriers. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of people being held on the phone and not being given an answer. We regularly review service levels on the UC helpline to improve our offer. If we cannot answer a question, we will call the claimant back.

Ruth George: The Minister says that the universal credit helpline is there and that staff are not necessarily trying to direct people on to digital platforms, but the complaints procedure for universal credit cannot be undertaken by phone—people are simply directed to make a complaint online. Those who struggle with online access are unable to do the very basic thing of making a complaint when they have a problem with the online service or the helpline. How does that square with his commitment that people are not being directed online? Will he make sure that people can make a complaint over the phone?

Alok Sharma: When a conversation takes place between a DWP staff member and a complainant, of course there is the opportunity for the staff member to answer the question. There are standard procedures when people want to make complaints. The hon. Lady takes a deep interest in such matters, and she knows that if any of her constituents ever have such an issue, she can write to me. I understand that, and it is incumbent on us, as Ministers, to make sure that we provide a response. In terms of the statistics that I have put out there, however, I hope she will appreciate that DWP staff make a huge effort to answer phone calls and deal with them sensitively. She also made a point about journal entries. The journal is available 24/7 for claimants to communicate with their work coach. That was not available under the legacy system.

DWP colleagues are fully committed to supporting claimants through a range of channels, and we are clearly making progress in the support we provide. In our latest
claimant survey, which was published in January, four out of five people were satisfied with the support they had received when claiming universal credit, which is broadly consistent with satisfaction levels in legacy benefits. Satisfaction levels are high, and the vast majority of claimants who use the telephony system found staff to be helpful and polite. Of course, I acknowledge that we want and need to continue to make progress and improve further so that everyone claiming universal credit gets the support they rightly deserve.

In conclusion, if hon. Members raise individual cases with me, I hope, again, that they will find that the Department and I are open and that we acknowledge when we have made mistakes.

*Question put and agreed to.*

1.26 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

---

4.31 pm

**Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): I beg to move, that this House has considered UK policy towards China.

It is my honour and privilege to lead this debate. I must start by declaring an interest. Last year I was pleased to visit China as part of a delegation from the all-party parliamentary group on China, very ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and superbly well organised by Saki Reid, the all-party group’s administrator. That visit is one of the reasons I called for this debate—not the only reason, but one of them.

My simple proposition is that our policy approach to China should rest on three pillars: expertise, realism and wisdom. To start with expertise, it is important that we exert every effort institutionally to understand and gain expertise about modern-day China, and about the remarkable scale of the impact that its recent rise will have on all of us and on our children. Since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping started his reform and the opening-up of China, at least 600 million people have been lifted out of poverty. China’s GDP has risen from $150 billion in 1978 to $12 trillion last year. China now has a defence budget of $228 billion, which is second only to that of the United States. The rise of China and the growth of its economy is the single biggest event shaping global politics today, and indeed shaping issues such as climate, for example. It is therefore our duty to gain expertise in order to understand that.

The scale of the impact of the rise of China can be seen in, for example, Chinese pork consumption. That is perhaps an unexpected example, but it provides an interesting insight—the scale of China’s impact on the world can often be seen in areas that one does not necessarily think about. Since the 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping put in place agricultural reforms, among other reforms, the scale of Chinese pork consumption has risen sevenfold. China now consumes almost 500 million pigs annually, which is actually half of the global production of pigs—I am quoting from an excellent report by *The Economist*.

That increase in consumption is about more than just calorific impact; it is also about the symbology of the new Chinese middle class being able to enjoy pork, which their parents were unable to do, and that represents a triumph over hardship that is part of the Chinese story. Also, the scale of that consumption has significant consequences for climate change. Water and accessible and available land are so scarce in China that it does not grow enough pig-feed to feed all those pigs, so more than half of all global feedstuffs goes to feeding Chinese pigs.

That has an impact all the way around the globe, because 1 kg of pork requires 6 kg of feed, mainly soy or corn, and whole swathes of what had been Amazonian rainforest in Brazil and other countries are now given over to the production of soya beans that are purely for Chinese pigs. In Brazil, more than 25 million hectares of land are used to cultivate soy. China is not one of the countries that has signed up to the soy roundtable,
which is a group of countries that have agreed not to consume pigs fed on soya beans cultivated on newly deforested land.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): As the hon. Gentleman is talking about international matters, does he agree that we should also be mindful of the human rights abuses in Tibet when we are thinking about trading with China? I think that is a very important issue.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I entirely agree that, along with climate change and other important global impacts, we should certainly consider human rights when thinking about our relationship with China. I look forward to having a free and frank discussion about human rights later in the debate.

The environmental impact of the rise of China is absolutely huge. I gave the example of pork consumption because it provides quite a good mechanism for understanding the significance of the rise of China.

It is also important to understand the historical context of China’s re-emergence as a global power, and that is exactly what it is; what we have seen over the past 40 years is not the emergence of China as a global power, but the re-emergence. Until the first opium war in 1842, China was indeed a serious global player, and in Chinese eyes the century between that war and the victory of Mao Zedong in 1949 represents a century of humiliation, which they are now trying to put behind them. That is especially the case because, in addition to the degradations of the opium wars, following the first world war Chinese ports such as Qingdao were handed to the Japanese. That humiliation is keenly felt in China even today.

It is really important to understand that historical context, because it is a central part of the new doctrine of China that has replaced the quiet rise under Deng Xiaoping. The new doctrine of Xi Jinping is much more assertive and seeks to return China to what it regards as its historically rightful place as an assertive and outward-looking global power. Xi Jinping has himself described this new era as “the Chinese dream”; not least at the 19th party congress in 2017. That must guide our understanding about China, and we therefore need to be very realistic.

The second pillar of the approach that I am proposing is therefore realism. We must be very clear and realistic in our understanding of what is driving the new doctrine of Chinese engagement with the world, because Xi Jinping, as well as seeking to return China to its historically rightful status, has reaffirmed the absolutely central role of the Chinese Communist party in the affairs of the Chinese state. This is about the party having absolute control not only domestically, but in relation to engagement abroad.

In seeking to understand the absolute priority placed on the role of the Chinese Communist party, it is useful to quote the evidence that Kevin Rudd, the former Prime Minister of Australia, gave to the Foreign Affairs Committee, which, as Members will know, recently produced a very excellent report on China. Rudd, who is a noted sinologist, was talking about the central role of the party in Xi Jinping’s China. As quoted in the Committee’s report, he said:

“[What are the core priorities of Xi Jinping’s Administration at home and abroad? They intersect in this institution called the Party. The interest of the Chinese political leadership is for the Party to remain in power. That is the No. 1 priority, the No. 2 priority and the No. 3 priority.”

When we consider China’s foreign policy and its engagements with the rest of the world, we need to understand the absolute priority placed on the role of the CCP. We need to bear that in mind when we understand the belt and road initiative, or Chinese defence policy and the rapid, and quite alarming, increase in that country’s naval capabilities—as a member of the Defence Committee, I have called for an inquiry into that. We also need to bear it in mind when we consider China’s treatment of Hong Kong and of Muslim Uyghurs and other minority religious groups, and its attitude towards human rights more broadly.

The absolute priority placed on the role of the CCP also drives China’s attitude towards domestic interference, which we in this country have experienced. I recommend to Members Charles Parton’s excellent report for the Royal United Services Institute. That report lays out the range of influence, moving towards interference, that China has carried out in this country, particular with regard to academia. It is certainly food for thought.

When we consider our response, we must be clear and realistic. We must ground our relations with the Chinese state in a keen understanding of the risks, as well as the opportunities, of dealing with it. Of course, there are clear benefits—we have to be very clear about that. Our commercial relationship alone is worth some £68.5 billion a year, and we should also be seeking positive relations through joint efforts to tackle climate change and deal with issues such as UN peacekeeping. There are significant positive areas that we should be focusing on; our challenge is to have the wisdom to know what is good and what is bad, and to be able to focus on the positives. We need to recognise and deal with the duality in the relationship.

We need what I call a two-handed approach. On one hand, we should be reaching out a hand of friendship, co-operation, and commercial exchange with our Chinese friends. On the other hand, we should be clearly delineating with red lines those areas that are off limits, including critical national infrastructure, over which we should have absolute sovereignty. That other hand should also call out domestic interference, if that is taking place, and call for reciprocal respectfulness. It should make clear our unwavering commitment to our own rule of law, which is not something we should ever put up for negotiation. In my view, dealing with China through our foreign policy is not a zero-sum game. We need to have nuance, flexibility and duality in our mind, which requires wisdom.

Someone who was very wise about China was, of course, Dr Henry Kissinger. He was better placed than most to understand the Chinese state. In his magnificent tome, “On China”, he calls for what he terms a “coevolution” through which China and the US, and by extension its western allies, “pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict. Neither side endorses all the aims of the other or presumes a total identity of interests, but both sides seek to identify and develop complementary interests.”

I propose that that spirit should guide our relations with China, and those of our western allies. That doctrine
precludes clumsy belligerence in the South China sea and requires an energetic China policy, based on expertise, realism and wisdom.

In conclusion, I will put three direct questions to my right hon. Friend the Minister. I would be grateful if he could explain what institutional effort is being made to increase the number of Mandarin speakers and other sinologists in the Foreign Office, because that is an issue of gaining sufficient institutional expertise and capacity. I would be interested in him describing in his own words what he understands the “golden era” to mean, in terms of the duality and balance in the relationship between the UK and China. Finally, I would be grateful if he could state what Britain’s ambition is for our relationship with China in a post-Brexit world.

4.46 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who made an excellent case and covered quite a lot of areas that I would like to cover.

I want to declare an interest: I went to China through the all-party parliamentary China group, although that was in September 2017, so it was a long time ago. As a result, I formed the all-party parliamentary group for the belt and road initiative and China-Pakistan economic corridor, which is working hard to get UK businesses involved in the multitrillion-dollar belt and road initiative.

I appreciate that the subject of this debate is wide ranging, but I will limit my remarks to the issue of international trade policy. The key question for UK trade policy towards China is how best to engage with the belt and road initiative, which is China’s signature foreign policy. Last week, I chaired a panel discussion on Britain, Brexit and the belt and road initiative. As we prepare to leave the world’s single largest trading bloc, I asked how post-Brexit Britain should respond to China’s BRI, the world’s biggest ongoing infrastructure project. If Britain is to take a lead as an upholder of the multilateral, rule-based system, we need to be asking ourselves that question. Estimates of China’s intended investment in the BRI range from $1 trillion to $8 trillion; it is a project on an unprecedented scale, yet UK awareness and understanding of it are very limited.

At the belt and road forum two years ago, the Chancellor described the UK as a “natural partner” in that project. It is true that this country is well placed to complement that initiative. There is a lot of scope for the UK’s strong legal, professional and technical services sectors to support the delivery of BRI projects. Britain also has deep historical ties with China, as well as with key BRI partner countries, such as Pakistan. A project of that scale needs international co-operation and partnership, which is something we are well placed to provide. However, our international co-operation must be tied to a commitment to uphold human rights, as well as social and environmental protections. The hon. Member for Aldershot mentioned the Uyghur community in north-west China, as well as the significant role that China can play in climate change. That is really important.

Too often, we are offered two competing visions of China: the paranoid western image of China as a threat to the global order, often endorsed by advocates of Trump’s protectionism, or the image of China as a benevolent state, which is promoted by its state officials. If we are to cut through those narratives, we need to strengthen our multilateral institutions.

At the heart of the BRI is a spirit of mutual co-operation, but China can best embody that spirit by acting with more transparency, embedded in the rules-based international order. The UK can be at the forefront of that order by acting as a strong, independent voice on the global stage. In doing so, we can reject the failed doctrines of free trade orthodoxy and Trump’s tariff wars, to promote a just trade agenda.

In an era when unilateralism and protectionism are on the rise, it is more important than ever that we reject self-imposed isolation and explore fresh opportunities for UK businesses overseas. Under the right leadership, we can do that in a way that reflects our core values of mutual respect and shared prosperity. China should be no exception.

4.50 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I will make a brief contribution. When I was appointed as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria, I was called in by the Department for International Trade and told that I would have to develop my own personal policy in relation to China, as I was going to come into contact with the Chinese all the time. Nothing was more exact than that. They are everywhere; they are bidding for all the major infrastructure projects, and doing so in a largely transparent way. That provides an enormous opportunity for us if we can get the terms of the deals right.

It was made clear that it was up to me how that should be handled. Should I see the Chinese as the enemy, as opponents or as potential friends and allies? Because I am that sort of person, I wanted to see them as potential allies. However, doing so means identifying the areas in which we can establish projects with them where we can, effectively, be subcontractors to them.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Does it strike my hon. Friend as strange that he was given that advice?

John Howell: I do not find it strange in the slightest. It was absolutely accurate. To echo my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), it is an example of a practical approach to dealing with the Chinese on the ground in an overseas country.

Sir Oliver Letwin: But does it not strike my hon. Friend as a little strange that he was given that advice?

John Howell: No, I do not find that strange at all. It suits the opportunities that are available. That is certainly what I have done.

As I was saying, I am a friendly sort of individual, and I would like to see relationships built with the Chinese. However, doing that is difficult for a number of reasons. First, I quickly found that, whatever the product is, it is often quite shoddy. Do we want to be
associated with that? Secondly, I found that no projects can be changed without a reference back to Beijing. That makes it difficult to deal with the projects on the ground as flexibly as I would like. Nobody on the ground has the ability to make the decision.

The last thing that I found, which is by far the most important, is that the Chinese leave nothing behind. When they come over to do a project, they bring an army of people to do it. They do not involve the local community or leave behind anything in the way of knowledge transfer or anything tangible. That is so different from the approach of British companies. For example, Unilever, which I know is a hybrid company, has taken on board the modern slavery agenda, and has largely eradicated these problems from not only the company itself but its supply chain. I have met some of the individual non-governmental organisations that have been involved with that.

My overall feeling is that we should treat the Chinese with caution, and examine the details of projects carefully to ensure that we can add value to the local community. Otherwise, there is no point doing them. There is no point helping to develop a country if we cannot involve people in the project itself.

4.56 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. As we consider our Government’s relationship with China, we must not lose our ability to speak openly and frankly about the actions of the Chinese Government. China’s prosperity is highly impressive, and China has developed innovative solutions on many fronts to bring unprecedented numbers of people out of extreme poverty. I am sure that all Members present agree that, whatever the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, it is simultaneously necessary that we discuss areas where its Government may have fallen short of the standards that we expect of our trading partners and allies.

Last week, Ramadan began across the world. However, we have strong reason to believe that few of the Uyghur minority in Chinese eastern Xinjiang could practise their faith. In recent years, authorities have termed fasting a sign of extremism, dangerously conflating a mainstream religious practice with radicalism. Any sign of so-called extremism—such signs include wearing a veil, regular prayer and avoidance of alcohol—can lead to imprisonment in one of the huge internment camps that have been springing up across the region over the last few years.

Karen Lee: I commented earlier on China’s record with regard to human rights, particularly in Tibet. These things have been going on since the 1950s, and we really have to focus on them.

Yasmin Qureshi: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Last week, official briefings by the Pentagon claimed that as many as 3 million people could be imprisoned in those detention centres. Although the exact numbers are open to debate, it is clear that an enormous number of people—at least 1 million—are being locked up against their will. We all want to have a trading relationship with China, but how can we ignore the fact that 1 million people are being detained? That is the minimum figure; the maximum could be 3 million.

Furthermore, although Chinese officials maintain that what they call “vocational training centres” do not infringe on the Uyghurs’ human rights, they have consistently refused to share further information about those detention centres and have prevented journalists from examining them. Where reports have escaped the camps, we have heard rumours of forced indoctrination, harsh discipline and even torture. Such claims are profoundly troubling. In January, I spoke in another Westminster Hall debate on this issue, and it is worrying that little seems to have been done. With little discernible action from the Government, we are left only with mounting estimates of the numbers who have been imprisoned.

Tragically, just as prisons are rising out of the desert, ancient buildings are reportedly being razed. While the world rightly mourned the damage to Notre Dame last month, few heard of the total erasure of another ancient building over the last year. Satellite pictures show that an 800-year-old mosque, the Keriya Aitika in south Xinjiang, appears to have been flattened, depriving people of an important piece of their cultural heritage. According to a detailed article in The Guardian today, two journalists have investigated and found that at least 24 places of worship have been erased, including Imam Asim’s shrine. Many people used to travel to that shrine three times a year, which was equivalent to completing the Hajj. It has been erased, and that is part of a wider demolition programme that appears to be being pursued across the province in an attempt to destroy its Muslim heritage.

Recent reporting also shows a more sinister element. The wider ecosystem of traditional policing and new technology is being used to construct what may be the world’s most heavily monitored area. On top of a growing network of police stations and the centrally planned roll-out of DNA profiling, Chinese start-ups are developing algorithms that track members of the Uyghur community, specifically targeting them to analyse their movements and assess the “threat” they pose. That is possibly a unique development—intentional mass racial profiling through artificial intelligence—and the technologies are no longer being used only in Xinjiang. The New York Times reported that law enforcement bodies in the central Chinese city of Sanmenxia ran a programme that screened whether residents were Uyghurs 500,000 times in a month. The dangers of such technologies cannot be overstated. While the rest of the world is waking up to the danger of unintentional bias in code, China’s Government are reportedly funding purposely discriminatory artificial intelligence. Ethical boundaries are being crossed with incredible speed.

There is also evidence that the issue does not just affect Uyghurs in China. Uyghur communities in Turkey, Pakistan and the US have stated that their family members have been arrested against further contact for fear of persecution. Investigative research by Middle East Eye found that the World Uyghur Congress, a group that has represented Uyghurs at the UN, had apparently been put on a terrorist blacklist, yet hardly any country had made the case for that or asked for it.
Encroachments on freedom to travel, the ability to access funds and the right to remain in contact with one’s family are fundamental deprivations of the most basic rights. Clearly, these issues require robust responses, and there are a number of avenues that we should be pursuing. More research needs to be done to understand which companies are involved in creating apps that are discriminatory by their very design. More broadly, our Government must provide more clarity over precisely what steps they are taking to provide Uyghurs with the support they need. Realpolitik claims that economic concerns should be prioritised are morally bankrupt and fail to face up to the enormity of the claims being made.

Perhaps the allegations are all false. Perhaps the satellite images and the other evidence are all made up. I am sure that the Chinese Government would want to dispel the rumours, and they can do so very simply. An independent group, whether led by a UN body, a human rights organisation or even a delegation of MPs, could be allowed to travel there to see first hand what is taking place. Unless that happens, we must recognise that moral lines may be being crossed that we can no longer ignore.

I have already asked this question once: what representations has the Foreign Office made to the Chinese authorities up to now? More importantly, what has their response been? Have they said, “This is all a load of rubbish. It is all made up. Come and have a look?” Will they allow an independent organisation to travel there to see? If China says that it is not doing any of this, and that these are false allegations, that is fine, but it must let an independent body in to have a look. That would also be beneficial to China, as it would dismiss the negative discussions taking place in our Parliament and in other places across the world.

The convention now seems to be that business interests are paramount in everything, but the human cost, and human rights, must come in somewhere. I am not comfortable that I can have a nice home—nice everything—at the expense of people in a number of countries we need to trade with who have no rights. That cannot be right. It is an immoral state of affairs. I ask our Government to find out if the allegations are correct. Whether they are or not, the Chinese Government should explain.

5.6 pm

Fiona Bruce (Con): It will not surprise colleagues or the Minister that I want to focus on issues of human rights, persecution and freedom of religion or belief. I agree that we should reach out with a hand of friendship to China, but a true friend does not flinch from telling another what might be palpable truths. I welcome the assurances from the Foreign Secretary on 2 April that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been raising the issue of human rights abuses with China, and his assurances that it will “raise those concerns with China at every opportunity.”—[Official Report, 2 April 2019: Vol. 657, c. 916.]

However, I am concerned that that is simply not enough.

In June 2016, the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission, which I have the privilege to chair, launched a report on human rights in China entitled, “The Darkest Moment: China’s Crackdown on Human Rights, 2013-16”. At the launch, an MP who knows China well expressed agreement with all our findings. His one criticism was with the title. It was, he said, premature: “It will get even darker.” From what I have observed over the past three years, he was right.

Last week, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom published its 20th annual report. It is an independent, bipartisan, US federal Government commission. It monitors the implementation of the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world in accordance with international law standards, and it makes policy recommendations to the US Government.

In its 2019 report, it identifies the ever-deteriorating situation of different religious groups in China. I will mention a few of its findings. First, the Chinese Government continues to take steps “to ‘sinicize’ religious belief”, which not only diminishes or prevents the right to freedom of religion from being in anyway meaningful, but is also erasing “the cultural and linguistic heritage of religious and ethnic communities”.

The groups mentioned as particularly affected are the Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims, about whom we have already heard today.

Secondly, in the summer of 2018, reports emerged that the Chinese Government were detaining hundreds of thousands, possibly up to 2 million Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang, in so-called re-education camps, allegedly to address the issue of extremism. Continuing reports come from those camps of abuse, primitive living conditions and disappearances.

Thirdly, it reports that more than 900 Falun Gong practitioners were arrested in 2018 simply for practising their beliefs or distributing literature about Falun Gong. The Government have also raided or closed down hundreds of Protestant house churches, including Zion church, Rongguili church and the Early Rain Covenant church. I will go into a little more detail about this, if I may.

Churches are being destroyed. Christians are being arrested, imprisoned and tortured. Members of the family are under surveillance, Christians are forced to deny their faith and young pupils in schools are investigated for their religious backgrounds. In the case of the Early Rain Covenant church in the city of Chengdu, police arrested more than 100 of its members in December 2018, including the pastor, Wang Yi, and his wife, Jiang Rong. They are being charged for inciting subversion, a crime that carries a penalty of up to 15 years in prison. A statement signed by 500 house church leaders says authorities have removed crosses from buildings, forced churches to hang Chinese flags and sing patriotic songs, and barred minors from attending. Indeed, one of the most disturbing issues in recent developments is that the Chinese regulations on religious affairs, which were implemented last year, banned five categories of people from attending church, including children under 18.

I know I have said some of this before, but I was interested to hear the Bishop of Truro being interviewed on Radio 4 on Sunday. He has just issued his interim report on the persecution of Christians worldwide—the interim report of the inquiry instituted by the Foreign Secretary himself—and has said that he is shocked by
the scale, scope and severity of the persecution of some 250 million Christians worldwide. Almost 100 million are in China, and one of the things that I was interested in was that he said, “A lot of this has been out there, but it’s not really being heard.” That is why we have to keep repeating these issues.

Bob Fu, the founder of China Aid, told me last year that:

“Last year’s crackdown”—on Christians—“is the worst in three decades.”

The pastor of Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church, Huang Xiaoning, said:

“The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to be the God of China and the Chinese people. But according to the Bible only God is God. The government is scared of the churches.”

The tragedy is that the authorities in China now see faith as a threat to their authority.

Those statistics are just the tip of an iceberg of issues that are identified in the report I have mentioned, and which are happening all over China. Many Members of this House will be aware of the Open Doors organisation, which produces a watch list of persecution across the world. It rates countries according to the level of persecution. In the 2019 list, which was launched in January, China jumped from 43rd place in 2018 to 27th. Bearing in mind what I have just said, I do not believe that that will change. If anything, I think China will make its way closer to the top of the list.

Open Doors emphasises the Chinese Government’s plans to contextualise the Bible to make it more culturally acceptable—in other words, to rewrite it. However, the Bible is a sacred text. We hear of Christian preachers who are being required to adapt their texts to include the core values of socialism, and to have their sermons pre-checked by the authorities before they deliver them. Facial recognition cameras are being placed in front of pulpits so that the authorities can check on who is attending services and ensure that no one from the five forbidden categories is there.

In October 2018, the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China counted at least 1,422 prisoners of conscience in Chinese prisons, which does not include the mass detention of the Muslims in Xinjiang. The violations of human dignity that are involved in mass surveillance in China should cause us real concern. The authorities are monitoring individuals’ every action and triggers alerts to the street and in gas stations, schools and workplaces. It monitors individuals’ every action and triggers alerts to the street. Some of this very sophisticated intelligence can actually monitor the facial traits of categories of people such as the Uyghur Muslims.

A recent data leak from Chinese police contractor SenseNets revealed that the IJOP app had collected almost 6.7 million GPS co-ordinates in a 24-hour period, tracing 2.6 million people, mainly in Xinjiang. We hear that China has plans to have 400 million CCTV cameras in place across the country by the end of 2020. Is it not reasonable that we have concerns about Huawei and what it proposes to do by using its technology in the UK?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. We have two more Members who wish to speak, so could the hon. Lady kindly bring her remarks gently to a close?

Fiona Bruce: I certainly will.

Having heard some of these findings, I question what religious freedom is in China. Does it mean anything, and are we doing enough in the UK to challenge what is happening in China? Other states have taken a stronger stance on the issue. In response to the situation in Xinjiang, the US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, has called on China to allow international observers to visit, and for the release of people imprisoned there. He has mentioned that if China does not comply, the US could invoke sanctions. 
May I suggest that our Government should look to take much stronger steps on challenging human rights grievances in China?

5.17 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I had not actually intended to participate when I decided to come to this debate, but I find that I really want to. Although I accept that there are very considerable issues about the treatment of various groups in China, it seems that there is a much larger issue, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) began to attend in moving the debate. It really is very important that we should begin to attend to it.

The fact is that the world is being remade before our eyes. Between them, China and India are very likely to be the dominant features of our globe in the latter half of the current century, and they might simply reassert a position that was normal before the industrial revolution.

We should remind ourselves that after the industrial revolution, we in Britain were among the leaders in a period of imperialism and colonialism, and of aggressive mercantilism, in which appalling scandals were visited on both India and China. We inherited power in India at a time when the country accounted for 23% of world GDP; when we left, it accounted for 3%. I declare an interest in this issue: I am leading a project on India and China at the Legatum Institute—incidentally, I am the vice-president of the Great Britain-China Centre. Actually, one need not be involved in these things at all to know what the history looks like.

On China, the opium wars, which have been mentioned, were correctly described by an independent observer of the scene—namely William Ewart Gladstone in this House—as probably the most awful scandal that had ever until that time occurred in the relations between one country and another. We fought a war in order to force very large numbers of people to accept the export of them to a dangerous drug. It is not surprising, therefore, that India and China have certain issues with the west, and Britain in particular.

Nor is the construction of the so-called international rules-based order, which has been referred to, anywhere nearer as unequivocal as people often imagine. It is, in point of fact, a construct of the western liberal victors of the second world war. The whole international rules-based system, which is being replicated in a completely
different way in the institutions surrounding the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, has embedded in it western liberal values to which I happen to subscribe, but which are not at all the values of the entire tradition of Indian thought and postcolonial Indian thought from Nehru onwards, nor of Chinese thought, ancient or modern.

The abuses and problems in China that have been referred to are reminiscent of things that went on in our country for many centuries. It is helpful in many respects to think of Xi Jinping’s regime as a kind of Tudor monarchy. The Tudors in this country, operating in part from this building, engaged in torture and religious persecution, and did all sorts of things of which we now do not approve. They also presided over the most vibrant cultural and economic renaissance that this country has ever seen, which gave great benefits to the world. They also initiated what became an industrial revolution—the greatest explosion of human progress and development, in economic terms, that had ever happened until the Chinese outdid it.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, in the past few years China has brought out of poverty the greatest number of people that has ever been brought out of poverty anywhere in the history of the world. It may in due course be overtaken by India, but unless and until that happens, it has a striking world record in improving the quality of life of its people. The fact that it is doing so in a way that does not wholly meet with the approval of western liberals is, first, no surprise, and secondly, something that, although I agree it should not be ignored, should not lead us to think that the major issue is what we think about China.

The major issue is a quite different one. My hon. Friend quoted Kevin Rudd, who happens to be one of the most sober-minded and sensible of the commentators, but in certain circles in Washington a powerful narrative is developing—this is why I asked him whether he really thought the Department for International Trade should be advising him to invent his own foreign policy vis-à-vis China—that foresees, almost as if it welcomes it, the prospect of an encounter, which actually means a world war, between the United States and China as China rises. Some of the more pessimistic texts have analysed cases in which one power has risen and succeeded the hegemony of another, and have found that rather few of such encounters have been peaceful. When Germany rose and sought to supplant Britain in the early part of the 20th century as the world’s leading economic and colonial power, the first world war eventuated. There are many other cases of such shifts occurring, not because of ideological difference, but simply because one power overtakes another. That thesis is now prevalent in some parts of Washington. Alongside climate change, I think it probably constitutes the biggest single danger to our children and grandchildren.

What therefore seems overwhelmingly more important than our criticisms of China’s internal arrangements, which we have a right, albeit a limited one, to criticise, is that we work with our allies to ensure we fashion a world for our children and grandchildren that does not disappear in a wholly unnecessary nuclear conflagration. That is a much bigger issue for humanity. Unless we start taking China and India seriously—not just in this country, but in the west as a whole—unless and until the west as a whole recognises that it cannot expect to maintain hegemony in a world in which, on a very wide reckoning, there are 1 billion westerners and 2.6 billion Indians and Chinese, and unless we reconcile ourselves to a peaceful coexistence based on a radical reassessment of the whole post-war structure, which was designed around the principles of western hegemony, we are heading for a very great catastrophe. That above all is the issue that we need to debate.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Julia Lopez—no more than five minutes, please.

5.25 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this important debate, and on setting out a very wise and thoughtful approach to relations with China. Too often in this place we concentrate on short-term issues that are driven by the news cycle, while entirely overlooking critical strategic questions that will have a massive impact on our constituents over many years and decades. That shortcoming contrasts with China’s approach. I hope that we can find a way of addressing it as we seek to reform our political system as we leave the EU and start to think with long-term vision about the UK’s place in the world and our relationship with key allies and new partners.

The focus on the UK’s relationship with China under the previous Administration, driven by Chancellor George Osborne, was welcome, if perhaps prematurely enthusiastic in certain sectors. It has reaped tangible benefits—notably, the impetus to make London the biggest renminbi trading hub outside China. However, Chinese influence within the UK is not without risk, and other big policy announcements deriving from that effort, such as the Chinese investment in Hinkley Point, threw up tricky questions about security and dependence. Broadly, we have a decision to make about our approach: do we wholeheartedly embrace the relationship with China; do we welcome what it can bring but handle with care; or do we take a cautionary approach that would exclude whole sectors of our economy from Chinese input, even if that means that we do not gain an understanding of its technological advances or benefit from its investment?

The Huawei case encapsulates that dilemma and highlights some of the trade-offs at play in our relations with critically important allies such as the United States. It should also make us ask why the western world got so behind in the development of 5G technology that it became reliant on Chinese telecoms firms. I would be grateful if the Minister could let us know whether there is work under way within Government and with allies to identify strategic areas in which China is gaining a competitive edge, particularly in autonomous weaponry and cyber-warfare, and how that edge might be leveraged in future.

Similarly difficult questions must be posed about the impact of Chinese wealth as that nation moves more decisively on to the world stage. China has a population of 1.4 billion, so even a tiny percentage of the most mobile and wealthy Chinese citizens will have a profound impact on global cities. I have travelled to Australia several times in recent years, and I was taken aback by the marked change I saw on my most recent visit due to growing Chinese influence, particularly due to the affluent student population and tourist numbers. That can be enormously positive, but how that wealth is handled—
particularly in relation to investment in domestic property markets—has the potential to cause public unease in the years ahead. Skyrocketing house prices in Auckland, New Zealand, have led to a ban on foreigners buying homes there, and there are already stringent rules on overseas investors in the Australian and Singaporean property markets in response to such concerns. London may have to review its own openness.

Antipodean nations are at the sharp end of some of those policy dilemmas. They are keen to have a positive relationship with a strategically important near neighbour, but nervous of dependence or exposure. That nervousness is something we can both learn and benefit from as we seek a new role in the world at the same time as allies step up efforts to diversify risk. In that regard, although new free trade agreements with the likes of Australia and New Zealand may derive only modest benefits due to their market size, both countries have valuable experience from which we can learn. New Zealand was the first country to strike an FTA with China, and each antipodean nation has suggested smarter ways in which we might work together—for example, by fulfilling the demands of the burgeoning Chinese middle classes for safe, high-quality agricultural produce. I welcome my hon. Friend’s tremendous exposition about pork markets.

We must be realistic and pragmatic about the power dynamic at play. We must place our relationship with China neither on an outdated sense of economic or technological superiority, nor on fawning weakness that leads us to be cautious about upsetting the apple cart. With respect to the latter, we should not underestimate what we bring to the table or allow ourselves to be cowed when we think that China gets it wrong, including on the kinds of issues that have been discussed, such as religious freedom.

China is aware of the growing unease about its expanding global influence and seeks credibility of the kind the UK can lend. That is partly why the Hinkley investment was so critical to Chinese ambitions in nuclear power. Last week the International Trade Committee heard from the Institute of Directors, which, in response to growing demand, is considering setting up a Chinese branch where Chinese directors could be trained in corporate governance. The picture is similar for UK corporate law firms.

Worries about the structure and terms of Chinese investment—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Lady please bring her remarks to a close, in order to leave time for the Front Benchers?

Julia Lopez: Certainly. I was going to say that my views on the belt and road initiative are similar to those of the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid). I also wanted to touch on my own observations from an all-party parliamentary group visit to Huwei’s Shenzhen facility in November 2017. I was rather alarmed by how some of the facial recognition technology was deployed, which woke me up to some of the issues that we will have to handle.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot for securing such a fantastic debate. We really need more time to discuss such issues, which will be critical in the years ahead.

5.30 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to have the chance to speak in this debate. China is the biggest country in the world—even with a properly scaled map, it is difficult to understand its scale—with a population twenty times bigger than the UK’s, and a land area two and a half times bigger than the whole of Europe. China is on its way to becoming the biggest economy in the world. Its potential as a partner for trade, cultural and educational exchanges is clearly enormous and the Government should rightly seek to explore such links.

As we have heard from a number of hon. Members, there is another, much darker, side to China that must be considered at the same time as potential deals, not just as an afterthought. China continues to operate one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world. For the majority of its vast population, the rights to express opinions, to participate in the democratic process, to read and write what they want, to believe what they want and to practise those beliefs, are at best severely curtailed and, all too often, completely absent.

A couple of hon. Members have spoken passionately and knowledgeably about the persecution of religious minorities. Some of those minorities represent 1 million, 2 million or 3 million people. We are talking about the rights of a huge number of people. The Foreign Affairs Committee recently reported that credible evidence shows that over 1 million people have been held in detention camps in Xinjiang province simply because of their Muslim faith. They are not a danger to anybody, they are not criminals or terrorists, and they have not done anything wrong; all they have done is believe in something and seek to live in accordance with that. As the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) so eloquently expressed, Christian communities in China very often meet with the same persecution, as do other religious minorities.

The response of the Chinese authorities is similar to responses to such atrocities elsewhere. First, they deny that detention and persecution is happening. Then they say that although there may be some harsh treatment, it is reserved for people who are a danger to national security. Finally, they say that what happens to human rights in China is China’s business and nobody else’s.

We simply cannot give any credence to that assertion. Will the Minister give an assurance that China will not be allowed to put up a border against international and universal human rights? We have human rights because we are human, and it would be a denial of the universality of human rights if we allowed the prospect of trade deals or inward investment to silence criticism of China, or any country that shows such contempt on such a huge scale for what should be international norms of behaviour.

There are also concerns about the degree to which China does or does not respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries, including those nearby. As we have heard, we must remember that China’s history with other countries has not been happy. For an awful lot of the past 200 or 300 years, China’s experience has been one of other countries oppressing its people, who retain, unsurprisingly, a significant degree of suspicion and wariness of anyone who introduces ideas that differ from traditional Chinese culture and beliefs. However, China cannot be allowed to trample
on the rights of its own citizens, or those of other countries, under the guise of protecting itself from external threats.

A potential downside to the rapid advancement of China’s home-grown technology industries is that it is now easily capable of causing significant harm to others, including the United Kingdom, should it wish to do so. We are not allowed to know how serious that risk is—apparently, we are not even allowed to know whether the National Security Council has considered it—but the United States has concerns, as do a number of other traditional friends and allies of the United Kingdom. Will the Minister confirm that those concerns will not simply be swept away or sacrificed at the altar of a preferential trade deal?

The belt and road initiative has been mentioned. Although there is no doubt that it could provide a way for the wealth generated by China’s economic resurgence to be more fairly distributed, we need to ensure that it is not used simply to make China’s neighbours more excessively reliant on China, to the extent that they almost become satellites or colonies. I am aware that this Parliament has not always had a proud story to tell in the history of colonialism, but it would not be in China’s long-term interests for its neighbours to become so reliant that they almost cease to exist in their own right.

Just over a month ago, the Foreign Affairs Committee published a thorough and worrying report that set out a number of concerns that need to be addressed when setting out our future relationship with China: the retrenchment of power in the hands of a small number of Communist party leaders, the persecution of religious minorities, the oppression of political opponents, the undermining of the international rules-based order, and the potential threat to the UK’s interests and security. Those concerns are important and must be kept in mind by those negotiating on our behalf.

The Government were very quick to surround themselves with red lines before beginning the Brexit negotiations. The Foreign Affairs Committee has, in effect, asked for some red lines to be set in our relationship with China. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to those. Above all, we cannot allow the Government’s desperation to land a trade deal with a major economic power to blind us to the substantial risks—both to us and to our way of life—if the wrong deal is agreed in haste and repented at leisure.

5.37 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this timely and important debate—he has given us an extremely useful opportunity.

The hon. Member for Aldershot spoke about the re-emergence of China after the century of humiliation, to which the right hon. Member for West Dorset asked the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), we were to have naval ships going into the South China sea. One does not normally expect to see such twists and turns in a mature European democracy.

The Foreign Affairs Committee report is excellent. It stated:

“China is seeking a role in the world commensurate with its growing economic power, and…This makes China a viable partner for the UK on some issues, but an active challenger on others. The current framework of UK policy towards China reflects an unwillingness to face this reality. The UK’s approach risks prioritising economic considerations over other interests, values and national security…there does not appear to be a clear sense either across Government or within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of what the overarching theme of a new policy towards China should be”.

The Committee also calls on the Government to publish a new strategy—that is a fair call.

John Howell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Goodman: I will give way, but I will not keep giving way, otherwise I will lose my time.

John Howell: The passage the hon. Lady just read out sums up exactly what I was saying. Furthermore, I treated my reaction to dealing with China with a great deal of seriousness.

Helen Goodman: I was not suggesting that the hon. Gentleman was not serious. In fact, he seemed to have a more serious approach to China than perhaps some members of the Government do. That is worrying.

The leak of discussions in the National Security Council was obviously wrong, but it was illuminating. We were shown that an unresolved dilemma and differences of view remain at the very top of Government. On the one hand, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary,
[Helen Goodman]

the then Defence Secretary and the International Trade Secretary argued against giving Huawei infrastructure contracts because of the security risks. On the other hand, the Prime Minister argued that such contracts should go ahead. We are left uncertain what the decision was, and why—

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):
Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Goodman: The Minister will get his chance to speak in a minute.

Why are the other members of Five Eyes now saying that, if we give such a contract, they will be reluctant to share security information with us? That is extremely concerning. Over the weekend, we learned that the Cabinet Secretary is leading his own mission to Beijing, with 15 permanent secretaries. That is a huge mission to take to Beijing. I hope the Minister will tell us whether he is in agreement with the Cabinet Secretary that we need long-term engagement, or whether he thinks, like the former Defence Secretary, that we need to be much more cautious. What precisely is the Government’s position?

The right hon. Member for West Dorset took a surprisingly relativist view. I thought that we were all western liberal democrats and that, as a western liberal democrat, it was completely respectable to stand up for those values, promote them and try to get other people in other countries to share and adopt them. I would point out two things to him. First, the Chinese have signed up to quite a lot of the big United Nations international treaties that were written in that framework. They did not have to sign them; they chose to sign them. Therefore, when discussing human rights in China, Myanmar or anywhere else, it is reasonable to hold other members of the Security Council to those standards.

Secondly, of course, it is true that we cannot force China to change and that we might be alarmed by what is going on in Washington. However, the best way to resolve such potential conflicts between large countries is to uphold the international rules-based order. That is the way to resolve such difficulties. Another question for the Minister, therefore, is about where the Government stand on the trade dispute between China and the USA, because that is a sort of proxy for future disputes and conflicts.

I also ask the Minister, as the Foreign Affairs Committee did, exactly what the Government’s position is on the South China sea problem, and how they see us moving forward. It is right to uphold the international law of the sea, and we should be doing that, but I want to know what the Government see as their legal base and what their intention is.

The belt and road initiative has an upside, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) said, but it has problems as well. Where do the Government stand? Are they with Christine Lagarde? Does the Minister agree that China has problems with environmental standards and with how it puts a lot of debt on to other countries in pursuit of the initiative? If he is worried, what are the Government going to do about it?

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) were absolutely right to raise human rights issues. To put another question to the Government, what will they do about the undermining of the civil rights of people in Hong Kong, where the Government have a legal position?

I am afraid that my conclusion is that we need a policy—China is a big, important country—so let us hear from the Minister what it is.

5.47 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank my jousting partner, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), for her robust views. In a relatively short time, I will try to say a little in response.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for securing this debate, giving me the opportunity to set out the Government’s position on what is undeniably the single most important geopolitical bilateral relationship that the UK has, and will have, in the decades to come. The “golden era”, which was announced in 2015 by the then Chancellor, reflected the importance of that closer bilateral relationship.

Our relationship with China is broad and deep, involving constructive, positive and frank dialogue on major global issues and distinct challenges as well as opportunities, but it has the potential to bring enduring benefit to both countries. We are clear and direct when we disagree with China. Our approach is clear-eyed and evidence-based. For example, only at the end of last year we called out China as responsible for a particularly damaging cyber-intrusion.

The relationship is and must continue to be firmly rooted in our values and interests, but I absolutely accept the warnings of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). To my mind, he was a little too relativist—that was the criticism—but his warning is important, both in the broad sweep of history and in the risk that in some of what we say we can be accused of being hypocritical, given our track record. I will come on to the rules-based international order in a moment or two, but he is right that that order was not set in aspic in 1945. We cannot simply hold firm, saying, “That’s it, that’s the rules-based order and we can say no more.” I am afraid that we cannot talk just about universal human rights without recognising the change in the world, the rise of China and India, and therefore the need to adapt and evolve the rules-based system with those two countries firmly in mind. Indeed, we need to engage firmly with them if it is to be a system that we can all rely on for all our citizens.

The relationship between our two countries is of global significance. We both are permanent members of the UN Security Council and the G7 economies, frenetically active on a range of global issues. We have together forged constructive collaboration on shared challenges. At the Security Council we address together issues such as international security and North Korea. On global challenges such as healthcare advances, climate change, money laundering, people trafficking and tackling the illegal wildlife trade, we have and will continue to have a lot in common.

I will try to cover all the issues that arose in the debate. On trade, in a post-Brexit world, trading relationships with non-European countries will become ever more important. It is anticipated that in the very near future China will become the world’s largest economy.
It is therefore welcome that the UK’s trade and investment with China are at record levels, currently worth more than £68 billion a year. We are seeking an ambitious future trading arrangement and will want greater access to China’s market, to expand and develop our economic links, not least in the service sector, as China continues to reform and open up. During the Prime Minister’s most recent visit to China, our Governments launched a joint trade and investment review, which is designed to identify a range of opportunities for us to promote growth in goods, services and investment, which in my view is critical in a post-Brexit world.

I was not sure it would come up, but my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) and the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) raised our relationship with national security and Huawei. China has become an increasingly important source of investment for the UK, and we are one of its most important investment destinations. Ours is an open economy—I take on board the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid)—and we welcome inward investment, but like any country we must ensure it meets our national security needs. That is true when we look at investment in key national infrastructure—raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot—whether from China or elsewhere. As we look at our 5G telecoms infrastructure, I assure the House that we will have robust procedures in place to manage risk and we are committed to the highest possible security standards. The Government will take decisions on the 5G supply chain based on evidence and a hard-headed assessment of the risks.

I was on the Intelligence and Security Committee in the 2010 Parliament when the issue of Huawei was first raised. It was raised at a conference in Ottawa, where we saw our counterparts from the US and Australia, as Five Eyes nations, taking differing views both from each other and from us on some of these issues. Through the National Cyber Security Centre, the UK Government have undertaken a thorough review of the 5G supply chain to ensure that the roll-out of 5G is secure and resilient.

As many Members may know, Huawei has had a long-standing joint venture with BT going back almost a decade and a half. Arguably, those who oppose Huawei having any more involvement will have to recognise that that has already been worked through. The extensive review that we now have will go far beyond individual vendors or countries. The decisions of that review will be announced in due course to Parliament. We want to work with international partners to try to develop a common global approach to improving telecoms security standards. We must all recognise that we live in a world of the rise of the fourth industrial revolution, of artificial intelligence, robotics and all the technology. Almost inevitably, there will be global standards. China needs to be fully engaged in that debate, in a way that India already is in cyber. We will have to make some very difficult decisions, but the choice in relation to Huawei has to be to try to engage, recognising that some standards are different, but to try to get us much protection as we possibly can.

To answer the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, I am very pleased that Mark Sedwill is out in China, with 15 other permanent secretaries, allegedly. That seems a sensible statement about the breadth and importance of our relationship across Government Departments. Some of the press reportage has suggested a dispute between Departments. We recognise the importance of the China relationship, and of course there will be some disagreements on issues between Departments—

Yasmin Qureshi: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I will not, if the hon. Lady will excuse me, because I want to move on to human rights issues.

The hon. Member for Warrington South and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster raised the issue of belt and road. Foreign investment will be essential to the success of the belt and road initiative. We have made it clear that we regard ourselves as a natural and willing partner for global infrastructure projects, but we are also clear that all projects must develop in line with recognised standards on transparency, environmental impact, including carbon emissions, social standards and—in importantly—debt sustainability. Therefore, there needs to be a sense of transparency on international standards. That was the message that the Chancellor and the Minister for Trade and Export Promotion took to Beijing last month at the belt and road conference.

We have touched on the rules-based system already; it has been the cornerstone of international co-operation and global standards for decades—indeed, since 1945. We recognise that that system is under huge strain. China has been supportive of some of its features, particularly with regard to trade, but less so of others, where it regards itself as not having had an input in the western rules created in the aftermath of 1945. We have been disappointed by its failure to oppose Russia’s annexation of Crimea or to support measures to strengthen the international ban on chemical weapons. We believe that with economic power comes political responsibility, and we want China to give strong and consistent backing for a rules-based international system. We must also accept that the system must adapt and evolve to take account of the fast-changing world.

I crossed out my section on the South China sea, but then the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland brought it up. Let me say this: our position remains unchanged. We do not take sides on issues of sovereignty, but our commitment is to international law, to upholding existing arbitration rulings and to freedom of navigation and overflight. In many ways, the disputes arise because of China’s concern that there could be a question mark over freedom of navigation, given how important the South China sea and the Malacca straits are to its exports.

I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) that I can touch on the next issue for only a couple of minutes, because it deserves a lot more time. Our constructive relationship with China at a diplomatic level is underpinned by the growing links between our peoples. Many visitors and students come here. We hope those personal links will allow more mutual understanding and bode better for future co-operation and awareness of our values—and Chinese values for those who go there.

Promoting and defending those values is vital, which is why we take a proactive approach to influencing improvements in human rights and rule of law in China. Our concerns are set out year by year in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s annual report on human rights.

and democracy, including many concerns about use of the death penalty, restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly, freedom of religion or belief, and civil and political freedoms. We continue to raise those at the highest level.

The Prime Minister raised human rights with both President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang during her visit to China in January 2018. The Foreign Secretary raised concerns about the situation in Xinjiang with State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in July 2018, as I did with my opposite number earlier that month. We will continue to lobby on that and the Tibet issue. I hope the hon. Members will excuse me, and I will write to them to set out blow by blow what we are doing and will continue to do in that regard.

It is very sad that we have not had a little more time. This has been a fantastically important debate, and I hope it is the first of many that look at the importance of the geopolitical rise of China and all our concerns with what is happening with the trade war, as my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset pointed out. I thank everyone for their contributions.

6 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered views on examination pressure from pupils of Ivybridge Community College.

It is our duty to work with the Chinese towards a shared future of peace, prosperity and reciprocal respect. I am very grateful to the Minister and all colleagues for attending this debate.

Leo Docherty: The rise of China is shaking the world. It is our duty to work with the Chinese towards a shared future of peace, prosperity and reciprocal respect. I am very grateful to the Minister and all colleagues for attending this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK policy towards China.
young people to get treatment was warmly welcomed, as ensuring that we help students to deal with mental health conditions at the earliest possible stage is both best for them and saves money down the line, when certain conditions would require much more counselling. A House of Commons Library briefing paper published in April 2018 shows that the average waiting time for someone to receive psychological therapy in my constituency was between 16 and 49 days. Most people are therefore seen within six weeks, but an appointment to child and adolescent mental health services can take significantly longer.

Nell, one of the pupils in the group, said that six weeks is a long time in the life of a teenager, especially one going through difficult circumstances, with it certainly being long enough to result in mental health conditions creating a dark place for young people. That is an important point. Mental health conditions should be treated with the same urgency as physical injuries and disabilities. I explained that the Government are seeking to prioritise mental health treatment, but I am sure the Minister recognises that we have a long way to go. What steps might his Department take to improve focus on prevention rather than cure in the mental health of school pupils?

The students were concerned about the current delivery of personal, social and health education classes. When delivered properly, PSHE lessons should help to make up a balanced school curriculum, providing an important opportunity to discuss issues such as mental health, living healthily and wellbeing in general. However, the students raised an important point: not all teachers are comfortable in delivering mental health lessons. They remarked that it is difficult for a teacher who is not trained properly, or who may not have any first-hand experience of mental health issues, to deliver a quality and informative lesson on dealing with those issues.

One member of the group, Ela, provided a good analogy: we would not expect a Spanish teacher to deliver a history lesson, or vice versa. They are not trained in that field, and are not likely to have a good grasp of the subject. Part of the Government investment aimed at schools should allow them to provide specialist mental health teachers, who can empathise and show greater understanding of what students experiencing mental health conditions are going through and how they can best deal with it.

The group welcomed the ambition of putting mental health leads in every school and college, but felt strongly that we must go further. We must ensure that existing teaching staff are properly trained to identify students who are experiencing mental health conditions, and especially those who may be nervous or uncomfortable approaching their teachers or wider school staff directly to talk about it. Of course, that is all part of prevention rather than cure and responding to the changing issues of our modern age. The group would be grateful if the Minister commented on what more Government can do to ensure that teachers are fully trained in this area.

We moved on to social media. Now, old people like me are often quick to blame the mental health issues that our youngsters experience on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat—all of which I am very familiar with—but the students told me that social media is not the overriding factor playing on their minds that we think it is. In fact, they made a number of points that took me by surprise. They all believed that, far from being an instrument of bullying or pressure, social media was, more often than not, the antidote to it.

Nell raised the point that bullying at school, both in the playground during breaks and in the classroom, can be far harder to deal with than that on social media. I had taken a view that was the polar opposite. The students explained that it is far harder to deal with bullies face to face during the school day, whether it be passing in the corridor, in the playground or indeed in the classroom.

If a student feels intimidated by someone in their class, that will have a negative impact on how they take part in certain lessons that they share with those classmates. It may, for example, make them less likely to take part in activities during class, perhaps by shying away from group tasks or by not volunteering answers to questions. That could prevent a student from achieving their true potential in that class, affecting their grades and results later. In their opinion, physical bullying remained a greater threat than bullying on social media, bad though that might be.

Evie raised an interesting point: social media, by contrast, is far easier to control. If a young person feels threatened or anxious by the actions or comments of another user or peer, they can simply block that person at the touch of a button. The bully or troll is then prevented from seeing that person’s profile, pictures and comments. It is even possible to prevent certain words or phrases being used in comments on social media posts.

For many students and young people, social media acts as a platform through which to share their collective experience of mental health conditions and support each other, and it serves as a reminder that they are not alone in dealing with their challenges. Before I sat down with this impressive group, I had not fully recognised how social media can help students cope with bullying and threats.

I was interested to see in The Times today, which I was reading on the train on the way to London, new research that tends to bear out the point of view expressed by the pupil group, namely that the link between social media and lack of student wellbeing was not supported by robust evidence and may well be the opposite of the truth. Can the Minister comment on the Government’s view on the impact of social media? I am sure he will agree that any comments should be based on science and not the prejudices of members of an older generation such as me. Does the Minister agree that at the same time as closing down the worst excesses of social media, we must proactively promote the positive resources that internet platforms provide in helping youngsters to deal with mental health issues?

We spent some time discussing exam pressures. The Green Paper states that

“Children and young people with mental health problems are more likely to experience increased disruption to their education,” and suggests that could be due to time off school. Results from a 2018 study by the Mental Health Foundation suggest that young people today have higher stress related to pressure to succeed than previous generations. Some 60% of 18 to 24-year-olds and 41% of 25 to 34-year-olds agreed that they experienced significant examination pressure, compared to 17% of 45 to 54-year-olds and
just 6% of those aged over 55. I may have simply forgotten what it is like to sit exams, but those survey results chime with my own experience in the 1960s and 1970s. I do not recall exam stress being much of an issue, either for myself or my fellow pupils, but clearly that has changed significantly. The students at Ivybridge Community College were fairly unanimous about the impact that target grades and upcoming exams have on their mental health. I believe they are now under pressure in a way that my generation never was. Does the Minister have any research to support that point and does he think that examination pressure today is too great?

Lucy made an interesting point when she said that students do not want to feel like they are constantly in competition with their friends and classmates. She said that they want to work in class to support each other to get the best grades they can, particularly when, as in the case of GCSEs and A-levels, those results will be judged for a significant period of time and be used to gauge the likelihood of whether they will get into their preferred university courses. The students would prefer the approach to exams to be more collegiate, rather than overtly competitive. They felt that we should not understate the importance of exams in school but that we need to emphasise to students that doing badly in an exam does not mean their life chances are over.

Annabel argued that students are tasked with taking significant decisions about their journey through education from the age of 13, when they start choosing subjects to study at GCSE. These are important decisions, as they will inform which subjects they study at A-level and university. That brings a great deal of pressure at an early age. The point was made that students should not always feel that they are in competition with their fellow classmates to get the best grades or to out-do each other; students would prefer a culture of working together. Can the Minister suggest ways to improve the way students collaborate with each other to help to improve their performances in exams? Does it have to be so competitive?

Lucy suggested that at school students are taught that the workplace is full of competition and that they will be competing for jobs and promotions. That is true, but the difference is that adults have a choice about whether to be in competition with their colleagues in the workplace. Students do not feel that they have that choice; perhaps they should. We need to demonstrate more intentionally to students that the workplace is also about team work and collaborating with colleagues. That should be no different in school; we should encourage students to work with and to support their classmates.

On A-level and GCSE results days each year, influential people from the business world remind students that they got 2 Cs and a D at A-level, but that has not stopped them achieving their full potential over the course of their adult lives. That is an example of how social media can help students to see that people who do not test well can still go far. That is an important point on which I invite the Minister to comment.

Amelia argued that the Government need to reconsider curriculum and scheduling in the run-up to already stressful exam periods and to look at the impact that target grades have on young people over the course of the academic year. Can the Minister comment on whether schools have sufficient flexibility?

I ask the Minister to join me in thanking the students at Ivybridge Community College—Lucy, Amelia, Evie, Elsa, Lilana, Izzy, Annabelle, Nell, Ella, Katy, Katie and Cameron—for being so clear and robust about these important issues. They all contributed to an excellent discussion, although I have not been able to include all their points. Can I invite the Minister to fully take on board the comments made by those excellent pupils? They are pupils at one of the largest and most successful state comprehensive schools in the UK, which has been outstanding for as long as I can remember. They are intelligent and articulate young people, who demonstrated an extraordinary understanding of the issues affecting them. They were able to talk confidently and openly about how they feel their schooling could be improved, in the presence of their teaching staff. We should take notice of those fine young people and work as hard as possible to deliver for them.

I realise that the Government are already active on some of these issues. By aiming to put dedicated mental health leads into every school and college, the Government have recognised the need to take a co-ordinated, multi-agency approach to understanding children and young people’s mental health conditions and are putting together the most effective package of treatment and support for young people. I welcome the fundamental principles proposed at the heart of last year’s Green Paper: ensuring designated mental health leads in all schools and colleges, by providing an extra £15 million to £20 million per year from 2019, and encouraging schools and colleges to collaborate locally to help improve services for students and reduce NHS waiting times for young people’s access to specialist services.

Whether we like it or not—or fully understand it—the mental wellbeing of our young people today is rapidly becoming one of the key issues that we must deal with. Although perhaps it has lessened in the last decade, there is still a significant stigma attached to mental health conditions that we do not necessarily see associated with other health conditions. I hope the Minister will agree that it is helpful to hear from young people about what they request from Government.

Even though the students had been fairly robust with me, I left our meeting with an overwhelming sense of confidence in the future of this country. The pupils of the coming generation are exceptionally talented and committed to doing their best for themselves and our nation. We must now do all we can to help them achieve their potential; we do that best of all when we listen to them.

6.17 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) on securing the debate, and the pupils at Ivybridge Community College—particularly Lucy, Amelia, Evie, Elsa, Lilana, Izzy, Annabelle, Nell, Ella, Katy, Katie and Cameron—on providing such clear and articulate views on this important topic. I recall visiting the college some years ago and opening
to my hon. Friend, including that mental health is about not just treatment, but prevention. There has been a lot of focus on the significant investment that the Government are making in increasing specialist children and young people’s mental health services. The NHS long-term plan announced that by 2023-24 an additional 345,000 children and young people aged up to 25 will receive mental health support via NHS-funded mental health services and new mental health support teams, as referred to by my hon. Friend. Mental health services will continue to receive a growing share of the NHS budget, with funding set to grow by at least £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24. Spending on children and young people’s mental health services will grow faster than adult services, and faster than other NHS spending. That investment will go a long way towards tackling the sort of waiting times highlighted by my hon. Friend.

The trailblazer areas testing our Green Paper proposals include some testing about how to achieve waiting times of a maximum of four weeks. But the trailblazers also focus on prevention. The mental health support teams that we are introducing will be linked to groups of schools and colleges, bringing expertise in dealing with milder and more moderate conditions, precisely to provide fast, local responses to issues as they arise. It is a huge undertaking. The teams will introduce a new, trained workforce, eventually numbering in its thousands, to provide support in the more preventive way envisaged by the young people of Ivybridge college.

The preventive aspects of our reforms do not stop there. The Department is providing up to £95 million between 2019 and 2024 to support the delivery of the Green Paper proposals, including the costs of a significant training programme for senior mental health leads, to help schools to put whole-school approaches to mental health in place.

The Ivybridge pupils emphasised the importance of PSHE to my hon. Friend. Our reforms in that area, making a new relationships and health education curriculum compulsory in all state-funded schools from September 2020, are probably the most significant step of all. Health education includes a new requirement for all pupils to be taught about mental health. The aim of making the subject compulsory is to bring the quality and consistency that the pupils are calling for, ensuring that pupils are taught the right framework of knowledge to help them to lead a mentally healthy lifestyle and deal with the challenges they face.

The new subject will include content such as understanding emotions, identifying where someone is experiencing signs of poor mental health, simple self-care, and how and when to seek support. Schools will be required to teach the new subjects from September 2020, but we are encouraging schools to get under way sooner. We already have hundreds of schools signed up as early adopters, with more schools registering every day. To help schools to teach the new subjects effectively, we recently announced an additional £6 million in 2019-20 to design and develop the training and resources that schools need.

We are also building the evidence on what other support for wellbeing works in schools. Our children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing research programme is one of the largest studies of its kind in the world. Thousands of children and young people will learn how to use a range of innovative techniques to promote good mental health and wellbeing.

I was not surprised to hear the views of young people that social media can be a force for good in relation to mental health—although I was impressed by the range of apps that my hon. Friend is familiar with. Social media is part of life and relationships for young people, but for it to be helpful we need to make sure that the online environment is as safe as possible. The Government’s recent online harms White Paper set out a range of measures, detailing how we will tackle online harms and setting clear responsibilities for technology companies to keep UK citizens, and especially children, safe.

We also need to equip young people with the knowledge to use the internet and social media safely, understanding how to deal with the different behaviours they will encounter online. That is why, to support the teaching of the relationships and health education content, we are developing detailed guidance on teaching about all aspects of internet safety, to help schools deliver the new subjects in a co-ordinated and coherent way.

We know that all kinds of bullying, whether in school or online, can have long-term effects on mental health as well as immediate impacts on pupils. The Government have sent a clear message to schools that bullying for any reason is unacceptable. All schools are legally required to have a behaviour policy with measures to prevent all forms of bullying. Relationships education will also include content on tackling bullying. To support schools further, we are providing more than £2.8 million to projects run by anti-bullying organisations such as the Anti-Bullying Alliance and the Diana Award.

My hon. Friend also talked about exam stress, which obviously is a particular issue at this time of year, with hundreds of thousands of teenagers up and down the country preparing to sit their GCSEs, A-levels and other exams. I take this opportunity to wish all those students, including those at Ivybridge, all the very best with their exams.

I would beg to differ from my hon. Friend on one point, when he says that exam stress was not much of an issue in the 1960s and 1970s. I think that exams are inherently stressful, for any generation. Perhaps my hon. Friend has forgotten, but certainly my own experience in the 1970s was that sitting my O-levels and A-levels was a challenging time. I know that for some students that pressure can get too much and can tip over into real mental health problems. Clearly that is a matter for concern, and the support that I have described is there to help those young people.

However, for very many young people the level of stress created by exams is manageable, so long as they are well supported by their schools, families and peers. Research shows that there is a clear difference between exam stress and exam anxiety, which is a cause for concern. Recent research found that young people recognise that exams can be a time of pressure and want their school to support them, especially on how best to revise and prepare for those exams. We trust schools to provide that guidance, and there is help to support them to do so. Ofqual support includes a blog aimed at teachers and a guide for students on coping with exam pressure, produced with Professor Dave Putwain from Liverpool John Moores University.
My hon. Friend mentioned that two of the students at Ivybridge had talked about not wanting to feel that they are in competition with their classmates. He also invited me to comment on the fact that there are many successful people who did not do well in their exams. He is quite right; no student should be made to feel that their life chances are over because they did badly in an exam. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his recent article on the subject, not many of those people “would say that it isn’t important to do as well as you can.” Few people succeed without preparing and working hard. All anyone can expect of our young people over the next few weeks is that they do their best.

Doing as well as you can does not necessarily come at the expense of others, and certainly not your classmates. It is fundamental to any qualification that it tests individual performance. Each young person will take that qualification forward with them into later life as evidence of what they know and can do. I also believe that it is right to expose young people to a certain level of competition, to help build the resilience that will help them to make a success of their adult lives, but that does not mean that schools should not foster a collaborative spirit and encourage team working during the school year. Indeed, I would hope that all schools are doing exactly that.

That brings me to an element of our preventive work that is especially pertinent, given that this debate has been inspired by young people taking an interest in mental health and helping each other out. We know that young people turn to their friends and peers first when they have concerns about mental health. Peer support programmes can be an effective part of a whole-school approach to mental wellbeing, as well as in tackling bullying and supporting each other with their exams. We are working with the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families to pilot different approaches to peer support, to help more schools to develop or improve their own programmes.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend and the pupils of Ivybridge Community College for giving me the opportunity to set out just how much we are doing to promote mental wellbeing, as well as to increase access to specialist services. I hope they are reassured that what we are doing will go a long way to help schools and young people themselves play their part in meeting the challenge of improving the nation’s mental health.

Question put and agreed to.
vital support the Welsh Government have delivered for constituencies such as mine—many parts of our great country have experienced hardship due to inept government at the UK level.

The gap in GDP between Wales and London makes the UK the most unbalanced EU member state in terms of regional economic disparities—a truly shocking statistic that shows the size of the challenge we face if we are to reduce inequality and spread opportunity. In Aberavon, we have had absolutely no regional development support from Westminster. The Swansea bay tidal lagoon would have put south Wales at the forefront of a 21st-century industry, marrying our desperate need to produce more green energy with the creation of genuinely high-quality jobs across the region.

Wales was the cradle of the first industrial revolution, and we could have been the cradle of a new, green revolution, but the Tory Government ran scared, spending £1 billion to buy the votes of each Democratic Unionist party Member but not a single penny for a long-term strategic infrastructure project that could have boosted wealth and opportunity for my constituents and so many across south Wales. I cannot help wondering whether that £1 billion would pass a value for money audit, given the voting behaviour of the DUP over recent months, but I digress.

The tidal lagoon decision followed hot on the heels of another broken promise: to electrify our railway lines. That promise made it only as far as Cardiff, with the line down to Port Talbot and Swansea still firmly embedded in the 20th century. With everything the Transport Secretary has achieved in his quite remarkable tenure, it feels that too little attention has been paid to this kick in the teeth for Welsh commuters and travellers and for the Welsh economy. Maybe handing a £50 million ferry contract to a company with no ferries was in fact a cunning plan to distract us from the fact that the Government he represents were holding Wales in contempt.

Thankfully, where the UK Government have failed, other tiers of governance have stepped in to give the Welsh economy a much-needed boost. The Welsh Government and local councils have combined to deliver so many crucial projects, but many have relied on the funding that we receive from the European Union—the EU structural fund.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Although the Swansea bay campus is in my hon. Friend’s constituency, the £60 million EU investment in it has benefited my constituency incredibly. Does he agree that, given that we have missed out on the tidal lagoon and electrification, we now deserve assurances from the Government that the Welsh Government and our local Neath Port Talbot Council, take, for instance, the new integrated transport hub—a Neath Port Talbot Council project in partnership with the Welsh Government, using EU money—or the sunken gardens and toddlers’ play area on Aberavon beach, which is a Neath Port Talbot Council project using EU funding granted by the Welsh Government.

There are more, from the bay campus, as my hon. Friend mentioned, to the Creosewr community enterprise centre, to the Cognition mountain bike trails in the Afan valley, to the Port Talbot magistrates court regeneration project. Those projects would not have been possible without European funding and strong political leadership of a type we see consistently from the Welsh Government and our local councils, but too rarely from Westminster. That is why Brexit raises a number of concerns regarding the future of regional development funding.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Government have previously guaranteed that every penny from Europe that Wales lost would be matched by Westminster funding. That still has not happened. Has he noticed that, in the meantime, the Government have guaranteed that the British overseas territories will now receive from Westminster every single penny that they received from the European Union? Is it not a bit of an irony that the British Government are prepared to guarantee money to our overseas territories but not to our territories at home?

Stephen Kinnock: Indeed. That is a quite shocking example of the failure to prioritise what is happening right on our doorstep. It is absolutely vital that we see the funding in Wales that we need if we are to deliver. We all know how much support is required to deal with the huge changes in our economy over recent decades. We currently have a system that, while not perfect, works relatively well: EU funding is targeted at less prosperous areas and delivered by devolved Administrations who know the needs of their areas better than anyone else.

Now, we can debate Brexit until the cows come home—I am sure that we would love to—but I am sure that we can all agree that it is crucial that Wales does not lose a single penny of the funding that we would have received had the British public voted to remain instead of to leave the EU on 23 June 2016. The UK Government have agreed to replace those European funds, 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. We need £1.7 billion per year UK-wide to keep up with what the EU is set to contribute from 2020 to 2026.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): There is an active debate ongoing about how the shared prosperity fund ought to be allocated. Some strongly argue that there
should be a huge competitive element. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is far better to have a needs-based formula, so that resources are allocated where they are desired, not according to which area can put forward the best bids?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree entirely. There are two key points. First, the big advantage of the current system is that it is depoliticised. The European Union works on the basis of data and facts and of a scientific analysis of what is required. There is a huge risk that the shared prosperity fund will be turned into pork barrel politics, where the fund gets used as a slush fund for, dare I say it, a Conservative Government in Westminster. Secondly, competitive bidding does not work. The shared prosperity fund needs to be embedded in an industrial strategy and a regional development strategy that works from a strategic point of view rather than being based on bidding.

The second key question is how this money will be divided across the country. The third question is what activities will be eligible for support. The fourth question is who will take the decisions on how the money is spent. We are still none the wiser on all those key questions.

It really is not just about the money. There is a real fear that this will be not just a financial grab, but a power grab: the Westminster Government will use this opportunity to reduce funding for areas that need it most and claw back powers that sit naturally with the devolved Administrations.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): This week is the 20th anniversary of the first elections to the Welsh Assembly. It is therefore important that, when we have this debate, we respect the role of the Welsh Government and devolution.

Stephen Kinnock: One of the key recommendations we in the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas have made in our report on the future of the shared prosperity fund—apologies for the plug, Sir Graham—is that the devolution settlement must be respected. Of course, the Westminster Government, the Assembly in Cardiff Bay and local authorities need to work as a team on this, but, fundamentally, the people on the ground know best how to spend this money and deliver maximum impact. Therefore, it is essential that the devolution settlement is respected in spirit and letter.

As I was saying, there is a fundamental worry that the shared prosperity fund will become a politicised slush fund, with a Conservative Government using it to buy votes in marginal seats. Those deep-seated concerns led to the creation of the all-party group, which I am proud to chair. The wide-ranging review we carried out heard from 80 organisations across the UK, including the Welsh Government, a wide range of local authorities in Wales and the Welsh TUC. Those representations were unanimous: the UK shared prosperity fund must comprise not a single penny less 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 and of our great country of Wales.

Equally, the UK Government must not deny devolved Administrations the appropriate control over funds. Local decisions must not be made by an official or Minister sitting at the other end of the M4.

While it is deeply disappointing that the Minister with overall responsibility for the shared prosperity fund, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), has refused to meet with our APPG, I am pleased to report that its officers met with the Secretary of State for Wales last month to make these points to him, and then last week with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Both meetings were conducted in a positive and constructive spirit, but it is shocking that there is still no sign of the public consultation on the SPF being launched any time soon. In fact, in one meeting there was a suggestion that the consultation may even be delayed until the comprehensive spending review in the autumn. Given that the CSR will include information on the funding of the SPF, I am not sure how relevant bodies, such as the Welsh Government and our local authorities, will be able to contribute in a meaningful way to a debate over funding when the horse will have already bolted. However, I can assure the Minister that our APPG will be watching carefully to ensure that there is no sleight of hand from the Government on this point.

Our APPG report contains 19 specific and deliverable recommendations. I hope the Minister has had an opportunity to read it, and we look forward to his response. However, in the limited time available, we would be particularly grateful if he responds to the following requests. Will he guarantee that Wales does not receive a penny less and that the devolution settlement will be fully respected, and will he provide clarity on when the SPF consultation will be published?

Let us be clear, the Welsh are a proud, resilient people. They are not looking for special treatment or anybody’s charity. However, we are looking for a level playing field—an opportunity to compete without having one hand tied behind our backs. This is the essence of the Welsh spirit: an unrelenting commitment to community, fairness and the wellbeing of our future generations. With that spirit, every single Welsh MP on the Labour Benches will keep fighting to ensure that Wales gets the regional investment that it needs to thrive in this city-centric era of globalisation and fast-paced technological change.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order. To get in everybody seeking to speak, I will place a four-minute limit on Back Benchers’ contributions.

6.46 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing the debate. He has made such a superb contribution through the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas. I also welcome the Minister to his post. I want to speak briefly about regional development across north Wales.

At the time of the 2015 general election and its aftermath, there was a strong political focus by the then Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer on the development of the northern powerhouse. As the MP for Wrexham, on the border with England, I was concerned
that investment should not be focused on one particular city in the north of England, but should be spread to regions, towns and communities to the west. My concern was shared by MPs representing English constituencies to the west of Manchester. We established the all-party parliamentary group on Mersey Dee north Wales, so that we had a political structure to enable us to raise the issue politically.

In north Wales our economy works from west to east, rather than north to south. We were very encouraged by the response from business, local authorities, universities and the community as a whole in supporting the initiative that we had set in place, which we used as a template to campaign for more focus and more investment in north Wales. Together with the work of organisations such as the cross-border Mersey Dee Alliance, that template led to the momentum that brought about the north Wales growth deal project, which we all worked extremely hard to achieve. It was very important that that project involved all political parties in north Wales, as well as business and the academic community, through universities and further education colleges.

My concern—I am sorry to say this—is that since the announcement of the establishment of the north Wales growth deal late last year, the cross-party and broad nature of the work being carried out in north Wales has lessened. Certainly, the consultations that have been done by certain political parties and local authorities in north Wales have not been in step with the collaboration that led to the achievement of the growth deal. Rather than the partisan approach that a particular political party has taken, a consensus among political parties to work for the benefit of north Wales is required.

To deliver the north Wales growth deal, I want a new structure that is more in step with business in north Wales and that involves Members of Parliament and Assembly Members, regardless of their political party. We need to set up an accountable structure to deliver the future investment in north Wales that must be delivered. Certain areas in north Wales did not benefit from European funding—my constituency did not receive the same level of investment as other parts of Wales—so it is imperative that we rebuild the sharing and investment that we set up after 2015 as soon as possible.

6.51 pm

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for the opportunity to speak in the debate, although, frankly, I would rather we were not leaving the European Union and not giving up the £370 million a year that Wales receives from European structural and investment funds. I hope that, three years on, the public are soon asked to decide whether they now wish to accept whatever exit deal is available or retain the much better deal we have as a member of the European Union. Today’s debate encapsulates the Government’s failings with regard to Brexit. We were due to leave the European Union more than a month ago and they have failed even to open the consultation they promised on how regional development funding will work in Wales after exit.

The lack of information about the shared prosperity fund is stark. I have asked 18 parliamentary questions about the fund and I am yet to receive a clear response on a host of vital issues such as when the consultation will start, who will be eligible to apply and whether funding for Wales will be guaranteed. Perhaps the Minister will give us some information today—who knows?

Meanwhile, what happens to my constituents who would otherwise have continued to benefit from EU funding? What about the school leaver who could have obtained one of the thousands of apprenticeships that have been funded by the £71 million provided to the Welsh Government’s skills enhancement programme by the European social fund? What about the student who might end up helping to conduct cutting-edge research on the causes of dementia at Cardiff University’s revolutionary brain research imaging centre in my constituency? That centre exists only because of £4.5 million of funding that the European regional development fund provided to Cardiff University, but its work benefits dementia sufferers across the world. What about my constituent who just wants to drive across Cardiff bay to see family in Penarth, through the tunnel funded under the old objective 1 funding scheme?

Such opportunities and improvements to my constituents’ everyday life are there only because the EU has partnered with the Welsh Government and local communities and has consistently invested a net gain of more than £680 million per year in Wales. Is it any wonder that we on this side of the House are suspicious about what, if anything, is coming down the line? We have had prevarication and obfuscation about the fund. It has that mythical air about it, as do many of the promises made after 2016 about life after Brexit. We were told by the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), the Environment Secretary and the Defence Secretary that Wales would not lose a penny from voting to leave the EU, but since the referendum result all we have heard about is efficiencies and targeting.

That raises deep concern on these Benches, because we have been here before. We were told that cuts to policing budgets were just efficiencies, before crime started spiralling; we were told that councils having their resources cut was just targeting, before the homelessness crisis hit our streets; and we were told that help was being directed towards the neediest constituents, before terminally ill people started arriving at our surgeries having been declared fit for work. Given that track record, the people of Wales have every reason to think that there will be less money, fewer projects and fewer opportunities for our communities.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon, I want the Minister to provide some guarantees to back up what his colleagues have said about match funding. The Government have failed to take decisive action to resolve the Brexit crisis. We have no clarity about future funding and we do not even have a date for the start of the consultation. It surely cannot be that difficult, because there is not much else going on, so perhaps the Minister could enlighten my constituents—they have been waiting long enough.

6.55 pm

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on the case that he made.
As we have heard, Wales has been a net beneficiary of European regional development funding. In recent years we have seen towns and villages across the south Wales valleys transformed and regenerated, much of which has been due to European structural development funds. Wales has received millions of pounds more than it has contributed in recognition of the deprivation that exists.

Over the past 15 years, the upper Rhymney valley in my constituency has benefited from about £16 million in EU structural funds for regeneration projects, while in the Merthyr Tydfil part of my constituency the figure is £35.8 million. Merthyr Tydfil’s town centre has benefited from significant regeneration, from a brand new college development to the creation of the hugely popular public space that is Penderyn square, which is a real focal point for a renaissance of Welsh culture and heritage, including the annual Merthyr Rising festival, which takes place over the spring bank holiday weekend later this month.

We have also seen regional projects, such as the dualling of the A465 heads of the valleys road, which links the Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney parts of my constituency and is a hugely important road link from west Wales across the heads of the valleys to the M5 and the midlands. That has all been made possible with the support of regional development funding from the EU.

In my previous life as a councillor for the New Tredegar ward in the upper Rhymney valley, I was heavily involved in the New Tredegar regeneration partnership. At that time, in 2001, the then Labour Government secured objective 1 funding for the south Wales valleys and west Wales, which resulted in billions of pounds of funding for crucial regeneration across the region.

The New Tredegar regeneration strategy helped to secure about £28 million for the community from a range of sources, including local regeneration funding from the Welsh Labour Government, which have helped to support and regenerate the Welsh valleys communities. The catalyst for the investment, however, was about £6 million of European funding. New Tredegar has new small business units, a new road, a community school, a museum and community resource centre and a community café, all of which have helped to breathe new life into a community that was deeply scarred following the collapse of the coal industry under Thatcher. Regional development funding was essential to begin the process of regenerating valley communities.

Mrs Thatcher came to power exactly 40 years ago this weekend, which heralded one of the most difficult economic periods in modern history for many of the communities in Wales and created significant deprivation. The Thatcher Government ripped the heart out of our communities, threw countless people’s jobs on the scrapheap and decimated villages and towns across south Wales without any plan to replace the jobs that were lost. The economic decline of that period can still be felt today, despite the investment in the valleys by the last Labour Government.

It was not just the jobs in the coal industry that were lost; there were many support industries. At the bottom of my street when I was growing up was Evans Coaches, a small family company that had taken miners to work since the 1930s. The company did other jobs, but that was its main business. Some 15 drivers worked there, as well as support staff, all of whom were local. The company went out of business after Thatcher closed the pits. It is one of many heart-breaking examples.

I have outlined the history of the communities I represent and highlighted why the economic deprivation exists. We benefited from the regional development fund simply because we needed it. It is essential that we have clarity on a future regional development fund, known as the shared prosperity fund. A few weeks ago, during Wales questions, I asked the Secretary of State about it, but I received little response. I hope that the Minister can provide some answers about how it will work. We were promised that we would not lose a penny when we left the EU. We need answers, because the uncertainty cannot go on.

6.59 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this important debate. The future of regional funding is crucial for Wales, and in the past it has been serious money. Wales has received more than £3.5 billion in European Union funding since 2000, and that money has made a difference. It has been a big boost for projects in Blaenau Gwent. There was the £77 million to support the dualling of the heads of the valleys road; there was the £7.5 million to help improve the railway line between Ebbw Vale and Cardiff; and there was a further £7.3 million to help build the new-ish Blaenau Gwent learning zone. Those important investments have helped many people to travel to work or to get the skills and qualifications they need. However, there is still much to do to help create opportunities for all our people. To do that, we need significant further investment. This funding needs to be in the pipeline and ready to go as soon as possible.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon said, given the recent extension of article 50 we need some clarity about the Treasury guarantee. In Blaenau Gwent we need three specific things: improvements on our railway line to Cardiff, with four trains an hour; road upgrades to the south and to the west; and the Welsh Government’s Tech Valleys project to be supported through a dedicated training centre that will equip people for the jobs of the future. The eastern valleys and Blaenau Gwent deserve their fair share from the new fund. After losing coal and steel, our valleys are taking time to catch up with the rest of Wales and the rest of the UK. Both the UK Government and the Welsh Government need to prioritise our communities’ industries, which previously powered not just the UK’s economy but the world’s economy.

Finally, the EU’s structural funds were not meant to be a replacement for a UK-wide regional policy but, wrongly, that is what they became. I therefore urge the Government to make two commitments: to ensure that areas such as Blaenau Gwent get a fair deal out of the shared prosperity fund; and to ensure that in future those areas also get the capital spending they need from other investing Departments, such as those responsible for transport, business and culture.

7.1 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing the debate, and I welcome the Under-Secretary of State
for Wales, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), to his place—I hope that he will add some much-required substance to the Wales Office team.

Three years ago, Vote Leave campaigners promised that Wales would lose not a penny if we voted to leave the EU. If we leave the EU, Plaid Cymru is determined to ensure that they fulfil their promise. I will briefly outline the principles of Plaid Cymru’s model for regional development funding. It would be a substantial new step in reducing regional inequalities across the UK; I think that Wales could take a lead in this regard.

Although the EU has the makings of a proper regional development policy, in the UK, by default, the regional policy is to favour London and the south-east of England. Wales currently receives £245 million more a year from the EU than it pays in. That we qualify for so much money reflects our poverty, which is on a par with areas in former USSR satellite states. It also reflects the extreme centralisation, the policy vacuum and the chronic underfunding by the UK Government. The worst inequality in any EU member state is indeed that between London and Wales, and leaving the EU will make the situation worse, unless the Government act.

Two years ago, Westminster committed to creating a UK shared prosperity fund that was “specifically designed to reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations.”

We are on the cusp of exiting the EU, so where is it? Wales will not forgive a Westminster Government that cannot, or perhaps will not, plan for the funding on which so many of our communities are forced to depend. However, decisions on future funding must be timely. We cannot have a Government-caused funding gap disrupting the proper transition in the delivery of projects on the ground.

Replacing European structural funds with a well-funded UK SPF could be genuinely transformational for Wales and for the rest of the UK, but we need timely planning and proper funding to enable Welsh solutions for Welsh problems. Funding must be managed in Wales and be pre-allocated. A cut-throat bidding process would pit Wales against other regions and nations in a race to the bottom. Also, funding must be multi-annual. I think that all hon. Members here today will know of project managers who have so often been disempowered by self-defeating short-term funding cycles.

Finally, Welsh programmes should continue to meet the goals of European structural funds, with streams for employability and economic development, with any funding being co-ordinated with Welsh Government policy and spending, as well as meeting sustainability legislation, such as the very welcome Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Wayne David: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as far as Wales is concerned, it is important that any allocations are made outside of the Barnett formula?

Hywel Williams: Indeed, that is a crucial point, and one that I have taken up with Government Ministers. In my case—in north Wales and in much of rural Wales—that point is particularly crucial for farming. If we pit marginal farming on the uplands of Wales against the grain barons of East Anglia, we all know what will happen. The hon. Gentleman makes a crucial point.

Funding for Wales should meet the goals of the European structural funds. I also mentioned the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which is crucial in this regard. Decades of under-investment by the Welsh and UK Governments have led to chronic and disgraceful child poverty, as outlined in the Assembly this afternoon by my colleague Rhun ap Iorwerth, and to families having to choose between heating and eating. Leaving the EU will harm our communities further, unless the Government act properly.

The UK shared prosperity fund must deliver for Wales. Otherwise, ever more of our citizens will conclude—rightly, I believe—that we would be better out and in: out of the UK and back in the EU.

7.6 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I will be as brief as I can, Sir Graham. I thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas, for the work he has done in this area. It is important work and it has really exposed the lack of planning by the UK Government on a matter of such importance to Wales and Scotland.

It is quite disturbing that communities and charities have been waiting for years to find out what funding will be available after Brexit, and we urgently need from the Minister the details of this so-called UK shared prosperity fund. It is also important to note that these issues that must be considered when setting up the fund, including its priorities and objectives, as hon. Members have already said, as well as the sums of money involved, the allocation method and model, the length of planning and who will administer it, because at the moment these matters are devolved matters, serving devolved priorities, which each devolved institution can decide upon and set the priorities for spending.

It is deeply worrying that, as the hon. Member for Aberavon set out, there appears to be a power-grab, plain and simple, because there is no clarity about what will happen. When questions have been asked about this, in local government questions and in other places, it has looked to some as though this process is a means of bringing powers back to the UK Government to decide what Scotland and Wales shall get, rather than Scotland and Wales deciding for themselves what they actually need. It is important that we do not lose that devolved power.

It is also critical for our communities and charities to know what the future funding will be. The EU funding will run out in 2020, and there are charities, businesses and all types of organisations the length and breadth of these islands that need to know, for planning purposes, whether or not they will have funding in just over a year’s time. Yet we still have not seen a consultation, even though the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has promised to publish full details. In November the Wales Office told MPs that a full consultation would be published before the end of 2018, and six months on we are still waiting. I seek some clarity from the Minister today on exactly what that consultation will look like and when it will begin.

The only real information that we have had was a written statement from last July, which consisted of a future planning framework for England, which does
not reassure any of us today that Welsh needs will be taken into account. I know that my colleague in the Scottish Government, Aileen Campbell, has written to ask about that issue, but she has not had much by way of a response that will set out what exactly will happen in those inquiries.

What we know is that analysis from the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions estimates that the UK would have been entitled to approximately £13 billion of regional development funds from 2021 to 2027 if the UK stayed in the EU. If the UK’s Stronger Towns fund is anything to go by, the funding for the SPF will be only 10% of what the UK would have received from EU cohesion funds, so we need to know from the Minister today whether this funding is coming, and whether there will be not one penny less for Wales or for Scotland in the new fund?

7.9 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I, too, extend my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for having secured the debate. Perhaps more importantly, I am grateful to him for having sponsored the “not a penny less” report through the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for regions, nations and local areas. That report has informed the debate throughout.

This is the second debate on the shared prosperity fund over the past six months; the previous one was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas). There were nine Labour speakers at that debate in November, and 11 are here today. The fact that so few Conservatives have attended speaks volumes about how important they view the shared prosperity fund for Wales as being. [Interruption.] Well done to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies).

“Not a penny less” has been mentioned by virtually every Member who has spoken today. Wales is home to 5% of the United Kingdom’s population but receives 23% of European funding sent to the UK; “not a penny less” has been mentioned by every Member, and that is the level of funding that we want in the future.

It is not only Wales that is concerned about the shared prosperity fund. There have been 177 written parliamentary questions about the fund over the past couple of years, many of which centre on the lack of consultation and detail that has been coming out—or, rather, not coming out—of the Wales Office, the Treasury and other Departments. We were promised a consultation in 2017, but it did not happen. We were promised a consultation in 2018, but by the end of that year it had not happened. As we speak, that consultation is nowhere in sight. We do not just need to secure the level of funding that we have received in the past.

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend is making an important point about the consultation. Does he agree that it is important that the consultation occurs as soon as possible, so that it can be fed into the comprehensive spending review and so that Wales can get its fair share?

Chris Ruane: I agree entirely. I am not sure what the Government are hiding, or why they cannot be open and transparent with the people of Wales.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very good point about asking Ministers. I have asked Ministers from the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Wales Office. All of my questions have fallen on deaf ears, and when I have queried why the consultation is delayed, no Minister seems to know. My concern is that there is a question of trust: the Government have cancelled various projects that they promised they would deliver, and now that we are moving into the position of what will happen post Brexit, they cannot give us answers. That is why we on the Opposition Benches are so sceptical about what the Government will deliver in the long term. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Chris Ruane: As ever, my hon. Friend speaks immense sense.

We are concerned not just with the level of funding, but with the issues of democracy and respect for devolution in this, the 20th year of devolution. We do not want the Welsh Government to be leapfrogged, and for the Conservative Government in London to be undermining devolution by dealing directly with local government in Wales. If we do not have direct, democratic input from the Welsh Government, what happened in the United Kingdom will happen in Wales. When the Conservatives got into power, they vired education funding away from the poorest areas and towards the Tory shires. Nine out of 10 of the most deprived areas in the United Kingdom have had three times the rate of austerity cuts than the average.

The poor will be punished unless the Welsh Government have overriding responsibility for the allocation of funding within Wales. It is not just Labour politicians saying this; the Federation of Small Businesses has called for the devolved nations to retain the power to set their own allocations and frameworks for how funding should be prioritised, taking into account local economic needs. There is unity across the board, with the private sector, government and public sector all wanting the democratic control that we have had for the past 20 years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon gave his three demands: not a penny less; that devolution should be respected; and that a date for the shared prosperity fund consultation should be given immediately, as has been mentioned by virtually every single Member who has spoken today. I hope the Minister will at least be able to answer my hon. Friend’s three questions.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I will finish a minute early to allow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) to respond to the debate. I congratulate him on having secured this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Members who have contributed today, showing their pride in, and passion for, the communities they represent here at Westminster. In particular, I thank those hon. Members who have welcomed me to my new post over recent weeks, and with whom I have already enjoyed discussions. My door is always open to those who want to engage constructively with the Government on issues that affect Wales and their constituents.

Although I have been in the Wales Office for only just over a month, I have managed to travel across the nation, so the issues raised today are already familiar.
Particular highlights of the past month have been, first, the visit to Tata Steel in Port Talbot, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Aberavon. There, I heard first hand about the exciting prospects for carbon capture and not just storage but use. I was also in Monmouthshire recently to talk with the local authority about proposals for a Chepstow bypass to cut congestion through the town, improve economic growth and link our Union more closely, given that the bypass will literally cross the English-Welsh border. Only last week in north Wales, I met the innovative telecommunications business Moneypenny—familiar, I am sure, to the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas)—which shows how Welsh firms compete on the global market.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Aberavon in his role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas. From what he has said today, it is clear that he is passionate about that issue, as are his colleagues who have also spoken. That is why, as he mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales met him and colleagues from the APPG on 11 March to discuss post-Brexit regional funding. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues found the meeting helpful and that it reassured him that this Government are taking future regional funding in Wales seriously.

Nick Smith: I congratulate the Minister on his role, and say “Well done” for travelling around Wales and hearing people’s concerns about the future. When will the consultation on the shared prosperity fund begin?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman; I will come on to the shared prosperity fund in a moment. Of course, if he invited me to visit his beautiful constituency of Blaenau Gwent, I would be more than happy to add it to my list of travels.

At this point, it is important to look to the future and at what the Government have committed in regional funding. In our 2017 manifesto, which I am sure was a popular read for everyone in this room, we set out our proposals for a UK shared prosperity fund to reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations. The UK’s shared prosperity fund seeks to provide the opportunity to move away from the old bureaucratic EU model, and to design a future regional funding model that truly benefits people across our United Kingdom in a way that reflects the specific needs and strengths of its different parts.

Jo Stevens: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: Not for the moment.

We will achieve our objective by strengthening the foundations of productivity, as set out in our modern industrial strategy, to support people to benefit from economic prosperity. As a Government, we have already begun engagement on the fund with the Welsh Government and key stakeholders in Wales. That engagement will continue, both at official and ministerial levels. Of course, a benefit of debates such as this is that we can hear the views of right hon. and hon. Members. It is important to recognise that direct engagement with stakeholders has already taken place, including with the third sector, universities and local authorities in Wales. Official-led events were held in Cardiff in November last year, and more recently in St Asaph on 30 January. As has been referenced several times, the Government have committed to holding a public consultation on the design of the fund. The consultation will build on the conversations and engagement on the fund that have already taken place. That includes engagement with the Welsh Government, because we will respect the devolution settlements as part of the fund, as requested by Opposition Members.

I recognise that right hon. and hon. Members are concerned about the delay in the consultation. I make this point in response: the delay should not be misunderstood as the Government not being fully committed to the fund—we are. The dynamics of EU exit, not least in this place, often mean there is a fast-changing situation, so it would not be appropriate to speculate on specific dates for when the consultation will be launched.

It is worth reflecting on how constructive work has taken place between the UK and Welsh Governments on city and growth deals in Wales. By the end of the Parliament, every part of Wales will be covered by a growth or city deal. Cardiff and then Swansea, as well as, most recently, north Wales and then mid-Wales, are or will be benefiting from that collaborative approach to turbocharge economic growth regionally in Wales.

I listened with interest to the points made by the hon. Member for Wrexham. He may be aware that I was in Wrexham last week talking with local authority leaders and other members of the North Wales Economic Ambition Board. I respect the fact that it needs to be a collaborative effort, but what is key is that the proposals come from the region upwards, not Westminster downwards. Although we have to ensure that we are satisfied that the money will be transformative, it is about what the region thinks.

Ian C. Lucas: I encourage the Minister to engage with Members of Parliament, who have been very active in establishing the forum of the all-party parliamentary group, with which he has not yet engaged. It would be helpful if he would meet the all-party group to hear what Members of Parliament, who have the largest mandate, have to say to him on this important subject.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive intervention. I am more than happy to accept the invitation, although I have not been short of north Wales Members of Parliament wanting to come and see me. I have already met the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), and spoken with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb). As I said at the start of my speech, my door is always open to those who want to talk constructively, and I hope to meet on their patch as well, if possible. Certainly, I am more than happy to engage with Members of Parliament on these issues.

Nick Smith: The Minister seems reluctant to give us a date for when exactly the consultation will begin, but does he agree that it should begin, and finish, before the comprehensive spending review is delivered?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his further intervention. As I said, I do not want to get into specific dates, but I am clear that the spending review
Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Our clear emphasis will be on ensuring that it works for local communities and delivers prosperity and growth across the nation. The consultation will set out our plans, and I am sure that he and other Members will be powerful advocates in ensuring that the fund works for their communities in the way they envisage.

I am conscious that many Members have raised the future of EU funding. In 2016, the Government guaranteed funding for UK organisations in receipt of EU funds where projects are agreed before the day the UK leaves the European Union. In July, the Government announced an extension to that guarantee, which will underwrite the UK’s allocation for structural and investment fund projects under this EU budget period to 2020 in the event of the UK leaving without a withdrawal agreement. That ensures that UK organisations, such as charities, businesses and universities, will continue to receive funding over a project’s lifetime if they successfully bid into EU-funded programmes before December 2020.

Our overall message is therefore business as usual. We want all places to continue to sign contracts while we still belong to these funds.

Wayne David: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: Not for the moment.

The December 2017 withdrawal agreement means that Wales will receive its full 2014 to 2020 allocation, because we recognise the importance of short-term certainty on funding. As we transition to longer term arrangements, we will of course ensure that all parts of the UK are treated fairly and that their circumstances are taken into account. We have promised, as I have already touched on, to engage the devolved Administrations as we develop the UK shared prosperity fund.

Wayne David: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: Given the time, I need to make progress.

I fully recognise the importance of EU funds to Wales. The guarantees set out by the UK Government show the importance that we place on those funds, as does the position that we have since reached with the EU on participating in the 2014 to 2020 EU programmes until closure. Under the terms of the withdrawal agreement, UK entities ripe to participate in EU programmes such as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ during the current multi-annual financial framework period will be unaffected by the UK’s withdrawal from the EU for the lifetime of the projects financed by the current multi-annual financial framework. UK-based organisations and people will be able to bid for funding and participate in and lead consortia in 2019 and 2020.

In terms of our future participation, the joint political declaration published in November sets out a basis for co-operation in European Union programmes, subject to the conditions set out in the corresponding Union instruments, such as in science and innovation, culture and education, development and defence capabilities, civil protection and space. Of course, the UK would make financial contributions were we to participate in any EU programmes.

On the specific point made about Barnettisation and potential agricultural funding, direct payments will continue to be made on the same basis in 2019 and 2020. The Government have already confirmed that overall funding for UK farm support will be protected in cash terms until the end of the Parliament in 2022, providing more certainty than any other EU member state. Crucially, the Government are clear that they will not simply apply the Barnett formula to changes in DEFRA funding beyond this Parliament. That means that farmers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will not just be allocated funding according to the population size of each nation, which in each case is significantly smaller than that of England.

In the beginning, EU funding was seen as something of a panacea for all Wales’s ills and as an opportunity that needed to be grasped with both hands. However, we should question whether, given the way that money was spent, it has reached those communities. We can all think of examples of projects that did not succeed, such as Techniums, the Ebbw Vale funicular railway and the All Wales Ethnic Minority Association.

I hear the passion with which many Members representing their communities have articulated what they see as the benefits of EU funding. However, we need to contrast that with the fact that some of the areas involved returned some of the highest leave votes. That was not based on whether a consultation was going to take place, but on what people perceived in their areas. It is a challenge for us as politicians to ensure that people see the benefit of what is done in their area.

As I set out at the beginning of my speech, the UK’s exit from the EU provides us with a considerable opportunity to reconsider how we invest our money in a way that helps to reduce inequality across our four nations. The current system is bureaucratic, inefficient and difficult to access. With the UK shared prosperity fund, we would have the opportunity to design a fund that works in the interests of Wales and the UK as a whole. I am clear that we will do that while respecting the devolution settlements and continuing to engage with the devolved Administrations, as we have successfully and productively done and continue to do on growth deals, and as I have done personally since my appointment, in the shared interests of those we serve.

Ultimately, the Government want to see an economically strong Wales, within a prosperous and strengthening United Kingdom. Working alongside the Welsh Government,
through a future shared prosperity fund and other initiatives such as the growth deal, we can ensure that that becomes a reality.

7.28 pm

Stephen Kinnock: The Minister’s speech showed that the Government are truly paralysed by Brexit. We could have a debate about that, but the fact is that that paralysis is having real-world consequences. What is the future of that key infrastructure project? What is the future of that vital skills project in our community? What is the future of that vital railway upgrade? We simply do not know. We do not have answers to those questions, and the clock is ticking. We are talking about 2020 as if it is a decade away. It is not; it is just around the corner. These are multi-annual programmes that have a time lag in them, and the clarity should have been forthcoming months ago.

I and many other Members asked for a guarantee that Wales will not receive a penny less, a guarantee that the devolution settlement will be fully respected, and clarity on when the shared prosperity fund consultation will launch. It is a matter of great regret that answers to those three questions were not forthcoming. We will therefore continue to press the Government for some clarity on those vital points.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned with out Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Children’s Future Food Inquiry

9.30 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Report of the Children’s Future Food inquiry.

The children’s future food inquiry has for the past year listened to young people tell us about their experiences of food insecurity. The result is the children’s #Right2Food charter, which was launched two weeks ago in Westminster with Dame Emma Thompson, who has done a fantastic job as the inquiry’s ambassador.

I pay particular tribute to Lindsay Graham, who has been running holiday hunger schemes and lobbying for a long time—she was the inspiration behind this—the Food Foundation, which did a lot of the work, and particularly the young ambassadors, whose involvement was absolutely fantastic. A number of other Members present were members of the panel, as was I, so I do not want to take up too much time. It is important that they contribute, particularly as some of them were more involved than I was, so I will try to be relatively brief.

I will start by underlining the scale of the problem, which led us to feel the need to do the inquiry. One in three children in the UK—4.1 million—live in relative poverty, and the number living in absolute poverty has increased. UNICEF estimates that 2.5 million of those children live in food insecurity, meaning that at times their families cannot afford to put food on the table or cannot buy the full variety of foods needed for a healthy diet. The Food Foundation, using UNICEF data, says that the UK has the highest percentage in the European Union of children under 15 living in a severely food insecure household, which we ought to be deeply ashamed of as a country.

Hunger has an impact on children’s mental and physical health; it affects their attainment at school, their attendance and their behaviour if they are too tired, too hungry or exist on a diet of junk food. Severe obesity at ages 10 to 11 is at its highest level since records began—I heard that we now have more obese 11-year-olds than the United States. Almost one in five children are obese by the time they start primary school, and one in three by the time they start secondary school. Typically, the most deprived areas have double the rate of childhood obesity compared with the least deprived, and one and a half times the rate of underweight children. It hits both ways; it is about malnutrition and obesity.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, which served on the inquiry panel, recently published an update to its 2017 “State of Child Health” report. Two years on, it highlights grave concern that no progress has been made on reducing child poverty and inequality in the UK. We cannot tackle these health problems, particularly childhood obesity, without tackling child food poverty.

Evidence for the children’s future food inquiry was gathered from workshops with nearly 400 children in 13 different locations across the UK. It also included an academic review of child food insecurity, polling of young people, more than 100 submissions from people working with children, a UK-wide policy review and a secondary analysis of Government data on the affordability of a healthy diet. Children told the inquiry how debilitating constant hunger can be and how it affects their ability to concentrate in class. There were children who had been forced to shoplift, scavenge or barter, just so that they could eat.

Since securing the debate, I have been contacted by a number of people who wanted to add to the information that the inquiry was given. One new teacher emailed me and told me of giving Christmas dinner to “a suspected severely neglected child” who “also has many learning difficulties. I have never seen a child eat his food so quickly (the term ‘wolf it down’ does not compare to what I saw). I asked him why he was eating it so quickly and he said that he hadn’t had a meal this big in days. It was not a grand-sized meal in the slightest. Once he had completed eating the Christmas dinner, he pulled out one of those plastic Chinese takeaway boxes with the remnants of some broken-up crisps (they looked like Doritos) and he asked if he could then eat them. I said he had just eaten a full meal and he was still hungry—he said yes, he was and that he didn’t know it was Christmas dinner day, and that they would have been his lunch.”

The teacher goes on to say:

“It’s awful the situation we are seeing. It cannot go on any longer.”

Parliament’s digital engagement programme has done a brilliant job of reaching out to people for comments using social media and has sent me a list of responses. Some are from people personally affected by food poverty while others are from people working at food banks, teachers or headteachers at schools, or people involved in trying to help families. Many of the responses highlight problems with the benefits system, particularly work capability assessments and sanctions, and especially the roll-out of universal credit. One respondent working in family law said “families are poorer today than I have ever seen”.

Another, who volunteers at a food bank, said “this problem seems to be escalating at an alarming rate”, and that they are “seeing a massive increase in referrals since the introduction of universal credit in the area”. Many of those experiencing food poverty were in employment. Some spoke of the particular difficulty in catering for special diets—for example if their children were gluten intolerant; a child with autism who had to have a special diet was mentioned—and others spoke of having to choose between heating and eating. Laura said:

“It has been the worst of times. Sat at home, considering if I should top up gas and electric; but then if I do, what will myself, my partner and my 2-year-old little boy eat? What is the use of having gas with no food to cook? But what is the use of having food but no gas?”

Another respondent who is in ill health with respiratory and arthritic illness, so has to keep the house warm, said:

“Our food budget is the only variable I’m able to hold back on. We feed a family of four on £100 a month”. 
A woman from Reading said that she and her young daughter “are literally being fed by mum”. She has a full-time job, but after taxes and childcare she takes home £30, which goes on travel to work. Sarah, a grandmother, says: “I have become broke with debt trying to bail my daughter and grandchildren out.”

The children’s future food inquiry has five key asks, as set out in the children’s #Right2Food charter. First, we ask for the healthy lunch guarantee. Children said that the £2.30 free school meal credit was not enough to afford healthier lunches or to cover breakfast if they did not get it at home. The Minister was at the launch with Emma Thompson and the children ambassadors, so he will have heard a lot of this. Today we heard from Citizens UK that children on free school meals lose out on £65 million a year because they are not given change if they buy a meal that comes under that daily limit; the money is kept by meal providers at the end of the day, rather than being given back to the child to roll over and spend the next day.

Our inquiry found that 23% of children who are not eligible for free school meals—because their household income is deemed just that bit too high, or because they have no recourse to public funds because of their immigration status—go without lunch because they cannot afford it. Many families of children who have no recourse to public funds who approached their local authority for section 17 support were refused. Some schools step in and pay for the child’s meals, but some, particularly in areas of high immigration, cannot afford to do so. We heard that packed lunches are often much less healthy than a cooked meal; just 1% of school packed lunches meet school food standards. I think the example that stuck in all our minds was that of the child whose packed lunch apparently consisted of just two cold fish fingers.

Many families struggle to feed children over the school holidays. The lost value of free school meals in the 13 weeks of holidays is approximately £150 per child, which is a lot of money for parents on low incomes to find, especially if they have more than one child. The inquiry makes a number of recommendations; it is quite detailed, and I am sure that other panel members will go into detail on some of the other recommendations, so I will outline only a few of them.

The inquiry recommends: providing free nursery meals to children who are entitled to free childcare, and introducing mandatory food standards in all nurseries, as in Northern Ireland; increasing the offer of free school meals to a wider group of children, including migrant and undocumented children without recourse to public funds; expanding the school fruit and vegetable scheme so that all children can benefit; and supporting holiday provision. Many of the details of the places that were successful in applying for this year’s Holiday hunger pilots were announced earlier today. We are disappointed that Bristol did not qualify, which I will mention again later.

Secondly, we ask for the healthy food minimum, which is about supporting parents and carers to put healthy food on the table. The inquiry recommends expanding the Healthy Start voucher scheme. At the moment it reaches only a third of young children living in poverty, and the voucher is worth only £3.10 a week, which I understand has not been adjusted since 2000. It is not index-linked, and it is not aligned with the Government’s own estimates of the cost of fruit and vegetables, so clearly something needs to be done to ensure that it is meaningful.

We also need to look at housing. Nearly 2% of households in England live with children in private rented accommodation that fails to meet the decent homes standard. Families in bed and breakfast, such as those supported under section 17, will not have access to cooking facilities. Even in other rented accommodation, there can be limited access to such facilities or cooking equipment, or families cannot afford gas or electricity.

Thirdly, we are calling for a new, independent children’s food watchdog, the role of which would include monitoring and inspection of school and nursery meals, development of a national menu designed by young people to meet school food standards, and looking at the school eating environment. I was surprised by the extent to which that came up during in the inquiry. Children, particularly in secondary schools, said that they were being rushed during lunchtimes, did not have time to finish their meals and were being forced to go back to the classroom having not finished eating. Such things could easily be looked at. Also, the Government still have not introduced their healthy rating scheme, which they promised in their childhood obesity plan would be introduced by September 2017. I hope that the Minister will update us on that.

The fourth ask of the children’s #Right2Food charter is headlined “Health before profits”. It is about prioritising children’s health before the profits of those big business that try to sell them junk food. We know what a pervasive effect they can have. That would include stopping marketing aimed at children on packaging, such as breakfast cereals with cartoon characters; ending promotions of unhealthy foods and replacing them with health warnings; and tackling the marketing of junk food on television.

People in many quarters are calling for a 9 pm watershed, because we know that a lot of children do not watch only CBeebies or wherever the children’s TV programmes are; they are watching reality TV shows and programmes at 7 and 8 o’clock at night. A watershed of 9 o’clock is therefore proposed, so that 59% of food and drink adverts shown during family viewing time would be banned from children’s TV. That shows how children are exposed to all those adverts banned on children’s TV but not at times when the whole family is watching a programme.

On fast food outlets near schools, I know that a lot of places are looking at exclusion zones—the standard is about 400 metres, but a lot are considering 800 metres. One of the suggestions was to increase business rates for fast food outlets near schools, using the funding to support food education and extended school day projects.

Fifthly, “Stop the stigma” is about ensuring that children who experience food insecurity and have to buy free school meals do not feel ashamed about that. One of the things that stuck in my mind when talking to some pupils was that their school had a free salad bar. The idea was that the children could spend their money on the unhealthy food or go to the free salad bar, but
there was a stigma attached—people were seen as only going to the salad bar because they were poor, not because they wanted healthy food. We need to look at that.

Talk about that ask included renaming free school meals as the school meal allowance, increasing the allowance to at least £4 per day, and allowing it to be carried over, as I said. Another recommendation was banning water being sold in schools. It is shocking that some school dining halls do not have water fountains. If children were thirsty, they had to spend what little they had—£2.30—on bottled water. The plastic alone means that such bottles should not be there, but the fact that a school cannot provide free tap water is pretty shocking. Also, poverty-proofing our schools would ensure that all children may take part in activities such as cooking, and those on free school meals should be kept anonymous.

I want to draw to a close soon, but I will first say a few things about what we are doing in my city with the Feeding Bristol pilot, which was set up a couple of years ago and stems from the Feeding Britain project that came out of the all-party group on hunger and food poverty and the work of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). We had a breakfast club initiative, in phase 1 of which we provided free food to 15 schools in high need. That was led by the chief executive of FareShare, which, as the Minister knows, takes in surplus food to distribute it to people in need. In phase 2, which will start later this year, we will target a further 20 schools in high need, increasing the nutritional value of the food distributed and offering it for free to about 30 to 50 children per school. Also under the auspices of Feeding Bristol, for the Christmas just gone FareShare distributed 56 free hampers across four children’s centres for those in most need.

We are also setting up FOOD—Food On Our Doorstep—clubs, based on a Manchester membership-type model, which is funded by Family Action. Two clubs will launch in July and the plan is for another two later this year. The clubs are a way of providing a top-up of groceries at very low cost—families pay about £3.50 a week per customer to get groceries worth about £15 to £20. The first two clubs will base in two children’s centres. We will then find another two sites. We have also funded two community engagement workers through the Big Lottery. They are based in community organisations and provide support to families in need, helping them to build independence into their food security.

Holiday hunger is the final thing to mention. As I said, we are rather disappointed that Bristol did not qualify for the funding this year; last year, we got £30,000 from the Department for Education, which we used to feed 2,200 children—a total of 15,000 meals—over the six-week summer holidays. The Minister’s office was in touch with me, because the announcement was made just gone midnight this morning, but I would be interested to know the criteria, because we felt that we did a good job with the money last year. We are now trying to crowd-source the funding and going out to city institutions because we want not only to replicate that this year, but to roll it out into something bigger.

A couple of weeks ago we had our huge annual Feeding Bristol event, with well over 100 people—perhaps 150—from all the organisations involved. That was not just people working in food banks and the charity sector but those involved in local food-growing projects, which we are keen on, or those who teach cooking skills or want to do communal cooking in cooking centres. The pilot is a brilliant initiative, and I know that we are not the only place trying to do such things.

The Mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, spoke out when expressing his disappointment at us not getting the funding again. He said:

“It is evidence of a defunct model of leadership where a city...has proven its commitment and ability to deliver, further plans are put in place but...they are dependent on London-based decision makers—who then took a judgment not to fund, which in turn poses a major challenge... Our efforts to end child hunger should not be undermined because we are thrust into a zero-sum competition with other cities and towns. What is more, it undermines the stated national objective.”

That is true. We did all we could to deliver the programme, and we are keen to roll it out, but this time I think in the south-west it was Plymouth that secured the funding, which is great, but it should be mainstreamed and not subject to the whim of bids.

The Minister came along to the launch, and he was praised for his willingness to engage. I know that he was keen to take part in the debate today. I hope that he has had a chance to reflect more on the findings and that he will come up with some firm commitments.

9.48 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on her speech and on bringing this important subject before the House of Commons. She is absolutely right to do so, because the Food Foundation, among others, has pointed out that public policy has in effect withdrawn from the food sector over the past 20 years or so. That is not right, because the area is important and we need to do better in many parts of it.

At the very start of life, as we know from the report, the UK has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world. Mothers’ milk, or formula milk, is the most important food that children get to start with. As a man, I feel particularly passionate about defending the rights of breastfeeding mothers to feed in public or at work—women should not be shut away. We are moving on, but we still have to challenge one or two people who do not stand up for mothers who want to breastfeed.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I am sure he was in the House, as I was, when the Equality Act 2010 was passed. The Act made it lawful to breastfeed wherever bottle feeding a child was allowed. Is he as disappointed as I am that the Act still has not been enforced properly?

Andrew Selous: Yes, I am. We need to go further. If any employers are not giving mothers breaks at work to breastfeed, they should change their practice. The hon. Lady is right to raise that issue.

As children’s lives go on, the problem gets worse. When children start primary school, 10% are obese, but when they leave at the age of 11, 20% are obese. A quarter of all children starting primary school are overweight or obese, yet one third are when they leave.
Cancer Research UK and others have said that, based on present trends, half all children in the UK are set to be overweight or obese by 2020.

Sadly, obese children are five times more likely to remain obese as adults, and therefore more likely to have diabetes, cancer, heart or liver conditions, or perhaps mental health conditions associated with those issues. There are 3.1 million people with diabetes. That has gone up from 2.4 million in 2010. Every week in this country we amputate around 170 lower limbs due to diabetes. That is 9,000 a year. People are having their feet or lower legs cut off because their diabetes has got so bad. That should shame us; it is an appalling state of affairs, and the number has gone up from 7,200 amputations in 2010. The trajectory is getting worse.

Our food sector is not working in the way it should. We know from the work of the Food Foundation and others that unhealthy food is on average three times cheaper than healthy food. Let me put that the other way around: healthy food is three times more expensive than unhealthy food. That is simply not good enough.

People in poverty and those with low incomes will buy what they can afford. If they are forced to buy unhealthy food, children set off on the wrong trajectory, which is why being obese and overweight is a huge social justice issue. For the first time in our nation’s history, the poorest are the most overweight and obese. That should set red lights flashing across Whitehall that our food policy is not working.

In most constituencies, fast food outlets, many of which unfortunately do not sell the healthy food they should, average about a quarter of all places to buy food. The figure varies from only 7% in the Isles of Scilly to 39% in Blackburn with Darwen, where nearly four in 10 food outlets are fast food outlets, selling primarily unhealthy food.

The UK does badly internationally, too. I am grateful for the research from the Guy’s and St Thomas’ Charity in its report “Bite Size”, which came out a couple of months ago. It compared London with capital cities around the world for childhood obesity rates. It is not a happy story. In Paris, 5% of children are obese; in Hong Kong, it is 7%; in Sydney, it is 10% in Tokyo, it is 12%; in New York, it is 21%; and in London, it is 22%.

We are worse than New York for childhood obesity, and more than four times worse than Paris, which is just the other side of the channel.

There is a particularly European dimension to the problem. I will not talk about Brexit, but about what is happening with food policy in Europe. I am grateful to the Food Foundation for its “Broken Plate” report, which came out a couple of months ago. In that, a lady called Kathleen Kerridge wrote:

“Across mainland Europe, cheap foods are healthy choices. It’s sensible that a kilo of tomatoes should be cheaper than a kilo of sausages. In the UK, however, the opposite is true”—or it is often true. Why is that the case? She goes on to state:

“I would like to see the UK take note of the European model. I think with food education and more affordable fresh produce, we could turn the tide for the poorest households and see us all eating ‘well’.”

I have considerable issues with the food industry in this country. I commend the work of the Obesity Health Alliance in calling for the 9 pm watershed and for restrictions on multi-buy promotions, both of which the Government are consulting on. That is excellent, but we need to get through the consultation and take action. As the Obesity Health Alliance says, these are serious and important issues.

Let me give praise where praise is due. One supermarket in Europe is doing the right thing—the Dutch retail chain Marqt, which operates 16 stores in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Haarlem in the Netherlands. It has become the first chain in the Netherlands to ban the marketing of unhealthy foods to children. Its chief executive Joost Leeflang said:

“Marqt helps consumers choose products that are produced with respect for people, animals and environment and this includes helping customers make healthier choices.”

He went on to say:

“Tempting children to choose unhealthy products doesn’t fit with how we want to help our customers.”

Mr Leeflang is a private sector entrepreneur running a business, and he is appealing to people’s better instincts—to parents to do the right thing for their children. Frankly, if he can do it, I want to lay down that challenge before us and we should do the same. We need to do more in this country. If it can happen in the Netherlands, it can happen here.

As a member of the Health Committee, I went to Amsterdam, where the deputy mayor, Eric van der Burg, a centre-right politician, has brought in a major, city-wide programme to deal with obesity. That meant having free water available in schools—the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is absolutely right about that. In fact, only water is allowed to be drunk in schools there. That meant educating the parents, helping low-income and immigrant communities to learn to cook properly and banning the advertising of unhealthy foods on the metro. It is a city-wide approach that is producing results, as is happening in Leeds—encouragingly, we learnt last week that the poorest children are starting to lose weight the fastest. There is hope that lessons from Amsterdam are coming over to the UK.

I hear what the hon. Lady says about people living in food poverty. We have to make sure that people have enough income to eat properly. We need what I would call prosperity with a purpose and inclusive growth, and there is no point running a free market system that does not benefit the people working in it. That has to be part of what we are about; it is what I am about, and I know it is what the Minister is about in his role in Government.

There is more we can do. We could learn from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme in the United States, which gives vouchers for farmer’s markets in the USA. I have farmer’s markets in towns in my constituency, which often provide lower cost, healthy food. We need more of that. Let us look around the world and take best practice. Let us not just leave this issue to the free market alone. Let us encourage the people who are doing the right thing, such as Mr Leeflang in the Netherlands, and encourage UK retailers to follow his excellent example.

9.59 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this important and very timely debate, and for her excellent opening speech.
Two weeks ago, as we have heard, we launched the children’s future food inquiry and it was widely welcomed. A huge number of people attended the launch, including a number of us here, and the Minister, who everyone was pleased to see. I co-chaired the inquiry with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), and my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) were members of the inquiry committee. The report is unique, because it is the first to include children and young people from low-income backgrounds—in fact, it is all about them and their voices.

The young food ambassadors were instrumental in the development of the report—so much so that we produced the children’s #Right2Food charter, which contains the voices of all the young people who contributed. They shared their experiences of food insecurity and hunger with such bravery, and ensured that not only their voices but those of their friends and peers who had experienced food insecurity were heard. They were so articulate in telling us about their experiences at home and school. They told us things that shocked even the most hardened and chauvinistic MPs on the inquiry committee; I think a number of us shed a few tears at those sessions.

I cannot mention all the things we heard during the inquiry, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East has already highlighted a number of them, so I will focus on three things that stood out: free school meals; the availability of free water, which we have already heard about; and the affordability and availability of food at home.

Hon. Members will know that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on school food. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham, who helped me set up that group 10 years ago, is one of its vice-chairs. We have campaigned for more than a decade with Members across the House to ensure that children have access to a hot and healthy meal during the school day. I am pleased that that campaign has developed to include provision for breakfast and meals throughout the school holidays for the poorest children.

I am very pleased by the Minister’s announcement overnight that the Government will provide £9.1 million this year for holiday activities and food, following last year’s £2 million. I was also pleased to see that two of the successful bids—those from Gateshead Council and StreetGames in Newcastle—were from the north-east. It will be really interesting to follow those programmes and see the difference that I know they will make to some of the most disadvantaged children across the country.

However, I want to focus on the provision of free school meals. As we know, on average, free school meal pupils receive around £2.30 a day. That rate was introduced in 2014 and has not increased since, so pupils have to stretch their allowance further each year to get a meal. However, the young food ambassadors told us that, more often than not, the cheapest food on the menu is the unhealthiest food. As the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, we see the same in wider society with supermarkets and takeaways, for example.

One young ambassador told us that she would usually get a sausage roll, chips and beans, because that was all she could afford on her free school meal allowance that would actually keep her full. She was looking for fullness, not healthiness. The Minister will know that that is not the best example of a nutritious meal for a young person who is growing up and preparing for an afternoon of lessons. It is fine once in a while, but we do not really want a child to be eating that day in, day out just because it keeps them full. Will the Minister therefore have cross-departmental discussions with his colleagues to ensure that, especially in schools, the cheapest food is not the unhealthiest food on the menu, so pupils on free school meals have the opportunity to eat the same healthy food as their peers, even if some healthy items have to be provided at a loss? The situation in schools must be different from the situation in the supermarkets.

We also heard that schools did not value lunch time as part of the day but saw it as an inconvenience to be rushed and got over with. Unfortunately, for thousands of children, the only meal they get each day is the one they eat at school. That is not right, but we know it is the case, so school meals should not be rushed or dismissed. However, the young ambassadors told us that they sometimes had their lunch time as late as 1 pm. That is an excruciating time for someone who has gone to school hungry to wait—even we cannot always wait until 1 pm—and makes it impossible for them to concentrate on lessons in the morning. It probably wastes the whole morning’s learning.

Most shockingly, we also heard that those very same pupils then had only a half-hour lunch break, a lot of which was spent queuing for food. If they had not finished their meal by the time the break was over, they were made to throw the remnants of their food in the bin. Imagine that—imagine having to throw some of the only meal that is available to you that day in the bin because you do not have time to eat it. It is just gut-wrenching.

One young ambassador also told us that pupils could be forced to take their detentions during their lunch break, further limiting the time they have to eat. Schools should not turn lunch time into a chore, something for pupils to dread or a time to punish pupils. Lunch time should be an integral part of the day—a time for children to get nourishment, to wind down and to spend time socialising with their friends. Let me be frank: children simply cannot learn if they are hungry and thirsty.

That takes me to my next point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East eloquently raised—its absurdity has exercised a number of us. We must remember that children from low-income families who are on free school meals are not the kind of children who have fancy reusable water bottles that they can refill as and when. They may also be from chaotic homes and, as we heard, some of them are child carers who have many responsibilities before they get to school, so finding a bottle to fill will not be foremost in their mind. In fact, it was the consensus among the young ambassadors that, even if they did have a reusable water bottle, there were no facilities at school where they could fill it with fresh water. The Minister heard that for himself when he met the young ambassadors at the launch of the report. I know he was shocked by that and said it was against school standards, but that is the reality that those children face. Sadly, I am sure the situation is the same in other schools.

If a child manages to bring a water bottle to school, there is often nowhere to fill it, so they have to buy another bottle. As we heard, that can cost them up to 90p—a
huge proportion of their £2.30 allowance for a free school meal, especially when they are battling with hunger. We were also told that, similarly to food, unhealthy drinks options such as juice and milkshakes are available and—guess what?—they are often cheaper than water, at 50p or 60p.

Andrew Selous: In the Netherlands, where the healthy food programme is called Jump-In, they allow only water in schools, they get parents on side, and they are very successful.

Mrs Hodgson: There is indeed a lot we can learn from other countries. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham and I visited Sweden at the start of our parliamentary careers, and that is what drove us to campaign to improve things here. In Sweden, not only was all the food free and healthy, but there were not millions of choices, so it was affordable to provide. The children all ate it, and there was water and milk on tap, totally free.

Clearly, there is a disparity in the messaging to pupils. They are told they have to eat healthily but they feel that a healthy diet is totally unaffordable for them. That brings me to my final point, which is about the availability of affordable food at home. Some 4.1 million children in the UK are growing up in poverty. That is a fact. That means that one in three children lives in a household that struggles to afford to buy enough healthy food to meet the official nutritional guidelines. Those families would have to spend 42% of their disposable income after housing to be able to consume a healthy diet. It is outrageous that a healthy diet is so far out of reach for millions of families. One young ambassador, who was a child carer, told the inquiry that food was so scarce at home that she rationed her food so her mum and siblings had enough to eat. I hope the Minister agrees that that is not a position any child should be put in.

Finally, will the Minister commit to setting up an independent food watchdog to look at these issues, to cost policies and to prevent children from going hungry? It is one of the five asks of the children’s #Right2Food charter contained in the report. I will not go into those asks, because my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol Central introduced an excellent Bill that sought to rein in some of these outlandish claims made by the formula industry. The Minister would do well to look at that.

Let me turn to diet and the provision of fruit and vegetables. On bank holiday Monday, I was enjoying a picnic in the park with my wife and kids and reflecting on aspects of my own childhood. One of my most vivid memories from primary school—admittedly, that was only in the 1990s—was of the first time I saw a real pineapple. I was the son of a single parent, living in a deprived community, and fruit and vegetables were seen as a luxury or too expensive. In many respects, they still are. The report references testimony saying:

“’I’ll choose something that I know they’re gonna like because I can’t afford to do something and for them not to eat it.’”

I remember that day in primary school when my teacher, very much off her own back, brought in some fresh fruit for my class to try. I recall being fascinated by these exotic fruits: kiwis and pineapples. For some reason, the pineapple blew my mind—because until then I genuinely thought it just came from tins. I was in primary 4 in Glasgow, and I had never seen a pineapple before.

I say that because I was recounting the story to my wife and son on Monday. We make a conscious effort to promote fruit and vegetables with my son, who, I am delighted to say, always chooses fruit over chocolate. In many respects, we are able to do that because we are a higher-income family, and I am conscious that many families see buying fruit and vegetables as an expense that they do not want.

Parents are able to have only so much influence when it comes to the provision of food—the report makes that point—so let me turn to the provision of meals in
the education environment, where we have made some progress but we have got further to go. Thankfully, free school meals have moved from the stigmatised dinner tickets being handed out at the front of the class to the less well-off kids and are moving towards universal provision. In my class, the vast majority of us were getting free school meal tickets, but it must be welcomed that we are moving away from that and to universal provision.

In Glasgow, the city council has committed to ensuring free school meals for all primary school pupils by the end of this council term, which demonstrates an ambition to provide warm, nutritious school meals to every child regardless of their background. Likewise, my own son, Isaac, attends a Glasgow City Council nursery, where, until recently, there was a small charge for lunches. However, those have been abolished, which is good news for family budgets and ensuring equality in the early years. That point is made in the report.

I am glad that our ambition is not restricted to school or nursery meals, because we have recognised that holiday hunger is a major issue, too. The roll-out of Glasgow’s £2 million holiday hunger programme has been hugely successful in meeting the demand for food provision and in bringing together partners to run community activities during the school holidays. Last summer, my church, Parkhead Nazarene, ran an incredibly successful programme of activities called Parkhead summer connections, providing warm, nutritious meals for families in some of the worst SIMD—Scottish index of multiple deprivation—areas in the country.

I am conscious of time constraints, but I want to touch on one other issue, which relates to breakfast clubs and how they tie into the education system. I was recently delighted to welcome a group of children from Quarry Brae Primary School in the east end, who were in Westminster to receive an award from Kellogg’s for the best breakfast club in Scotland. More than 40 children attend Quarry Brae’s breakfast club every morning, which makes a massive impact in ensuring that our young people are at school with a full stomach and ready to learn. Likewise, at Oakwood Primary School in Easterhouse, the headteacher, Vanessa Thomson, absolutely gets this, too. Working with local partners, she has ensured that free toast is available before the school day starts to help ensure that kids, many of whom live in a high SIMD area, are getting some form of nutrition before the start of the school day.

There is a lot more I want to say, but I was keen to offer a view from Glasgow’s east end, where we know we have so much more to do. I finish by quoting Aaron Ross, aged 20, from Easterhouse, whose words are in the report. He told the inquiry:

“People struggle to afford to pay rent and buy food for their families and themselves. Most people don’t want to ask for help as they are too ashamed or embarrassed about the issue. I want to be a part of this project to bring awareness to the rising issue of food poverty, and to help by providing better support to those in need.”

Aaron and many others have given of their time, opinions and experience, and it falls to us to ensure that the report’s recommendations are acted on and that we deliver.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab):
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for all the work she does. I want to acknowledge at the outset that she is a real champion of this issue.

Here we are again in this Chamber, talking about school food. However, this time it is wonderful that we have the children’s future food inquiry report. I thank Dame Emma Thompson and Lindsay Graham for the huge work they did on the inquiry, but I pay most tribute to the young people who talked to us and gave us the evidence. It was a hard listen for all of us—even for those of us who have worked on school food and children’s hunger for many years. We heard about their life experiences and about how, in many respects, the school system made things worse in terms of school food, when it could have offered a wonderful, nutritious experience for those young people. What they said was powerful; we are lucky to have those ambassadors.

School food has been an issue for me all my life because my mother was a school cook. Interestingly, I think we understood more about the importance of nutrition for learning 60 or 70 years ago than we appear to now as a society, which is dreadful. The issue was brought home to me when my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West and I visited Sweden in 2006. We were newly elected MPs and keen to get this issue on the agenda, and we were staggered by the way those in Sweden thought about school food. Young people came along in the morning. They got breakfast and lunch; it was provided free to them all. Their teachers sat down with them so that they learned social skills as well as having a nutritious meal.

Obviously, we were a bit shocked and said, “Oh, this is amazing.” They said, “How is it amazing? Children can’t learn when they are hungry.” Having a nutritious school meal in the middle of the day is just as important as having a desk, chair or anything else that we provide as part of the education system. We must take that on board—I hope the Minister is listening—because 13 years later we are still having to make the same arguments about the importance of a nutritious school meal, including breakfast and something later in the school day.

What is different at the moment is the context in which we are making this argument, because we know that hunger is rising in this country. Between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019, Durham County Council allocated almost 20,000 emergency food supplies from food banks, including almost 7,000 to children. That was just in Durham—it is a huge number. I raised the matter with the Prime Minister some weeks ago, because teachers in my constituency are reporting children coming to school who have had nothing to eat since they were at school the day before. Teachers are providing breakfast themselves, and the situation cannot continue. In the north-east, almost a quarter of families are living in poverty, which for a lot of them means poor housing conditions and poor health, including mental health. They might not live in an area where it is easy to access shops or affordable, good-quality food, so we must consider the whole picture.
Some things that came out of the children’s future food inquiry are worth emphasising, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East did a good job of that. For example, school lunch may be the only proper meal that a child receives, but what children eat during the day affects their concentration and performance at school. Entitlement to free school meals varies hugely across the UK, and thousands of extremely vulnerable children are excluded from accessing them because of their immigration status. I hope the Minister will consider that point.

As others have said, the free school meal allocation, at around £2.30, is not enough to enable children to buy a hot lunch, particularly if they have to buy water as well. I am glad that issue has been well aired this morning, because it is a disgrace that children at school in this country have to spend up to £1 to buy water at lunchtime. Private water companies must take that on board. The money might add to their profits, but what it is doing to children is outrageous. We also found that free school meals still carry a stigma, often because of the way they are organised. We have the technology for that not to be the case, so why do schools still do it? Perhaps we should think about how to rename free school meals.

Meal times are not valued as part of the school day, and they should be. We heard story after story of young people who simply do not have enough time to purchase a proper school meal at lunchtime, or time to eat it, as that often competes with other things they need to do. Young people also want a say in what type of food is delivered at school—that was more about cultural preferences than them wanting pizza and chips all the time, and they recognised the importance of having a proper meal.

One reason we are still here making the argument again and again for universal free school meals is the naysayers, and we will have to take them on if we want to make progress—Amanda Platell’s recent article in the Daily Mail is a good example. People say we have high levels of childhood obesity in this country, so we cannot have hungry children. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West said, however, those are two sides of the same coin. A lot of children from poorer backgrounds are not able to access good-quality food, and we therefore have a huge obesity crisis.

The last time we debated this issue in Westminster Hall, I and others were told that it was an abrogation of parental responsibility, because it is the responsibility of parents to feed their children properly at school. Practically, it is quite difficult for parents to give children a hot meal during the day, and we should think about education more generally as a societal responsibility.

Mrs Hodgson: People might say, “They can send children in with a packed lunch,” but as my hon. Friend knows, only 1% of packed lunches were found by a report on school food to be as healthy as the food provided within schools. It is almost impossible for parents to send in that healthy food.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

There was a universal free school meals pilot for two years in County Durham, and it transformed behaviour in school. It was incredibly important for the children to learn those social skills, and attainment levels across the school were improved in a short time. The evidence is there. I hope the Minister will look at it and think about providing universal free school meals. It is great that additional money is going to address holiday hunger, but none of that is coming to County Durham, which is the poorest county in the country. Will the Minister consider that issue?

What children have asked for in the charter is modest, and I hope not only that the Minister will consider implementing it, but that he will have higher ambitions in terms of properly serving the needs of our young people.

10.28 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on securing this important debate, and all members of the panel and other organisations on producing the report.

Far too many children across the country live in poverty, which we know can have a variety of extremely detrimental effects on their wellbeing, development and life chances. Nowhere is that clearer than with the issue of food poverty and food insecurity. Across Bradford, 21.8% of children live in poverty. In my constituency, 25% of children—more than 7,000—live in poverty. Exact figures for how many children experience food poverty and insecurity are harder to come by, but it is likely that a high proportion of those who live in poverty have experienced food insecurity and, ultimately, hunger.

I will turn to some of the ways that is damaging children in my constituency, as the report rightly makes clear the link between food insecurity and attendance, achievement and attainment at school. What children eat during the day affects their concentration and performance in school. Children who are hungry are significantly more likely to misbehave or lose concentration and attention during lessons.

Hunger during term time is further compounded by hunger in the holidays. The long summer holidays are thought to contribute to weeks’ worth of learning loss for the most disadvantaged children, and many teachers report its effects when the school year begins again. It is clear that food insecurity and going hungry is holding our children back from achieving their full potential. In my constituency, which ranks at the very bottom of all English constituencies for school-age social mobility, this is having a devastating impact on life chances for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. If we are to address the urgent problem of poor social mobility in this country, highlighted recently by the Social Mobility Commission’s annual report, we must ensure that as a bare minimum no child goes hungry.

One of the great strengths of the report, and what sets it apart from others, is that it prominently features the contribution of young people who have themselves experienced food poverty. Their testimony is both heartbreaking and powerful. I commend their dignity and I hope that their stories will be a wake-up call for all politicians to act now. I endorse the children’s #Right2Food charter that was developed as part of the inquiry. All children, whatever their background, deserve nothing
less than a healthy and balanced diet. We must consider a range of policies that can further this goal, and I support the calls to expand free school meals and the Healthy Start voucher scheme.

I agree with the inquiry’s conclusion that the Government must act with more urgency and focus on this issue, for instance by establishing a new watchdog and including young people in its leadership. Our ultimate ambition must be that no child experiences poverty of any type. That will require wholesale effort by the Government that reaches across all Government Departments. As a start, reinstating and properly funding Sure Start and investing in our early years programme is a must. While children continue to live in poverty, the very least we must do is ensure that they do not go hungry.

10.32 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As we have heard, 2.5 million children in the UK are living in food insecurity. I was honoured, along with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), to co-chair this inquiry. I am also vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hunger and food poverty.

The inquiry heard from 400 young people across the UK. We met 15 young ambassadors, who were absolutely amazing and so articulate in explaining their experiences. Listing to them was harrowing. In the session that I chaired I kept having to put my glasses on to hide the fact that I was crying. They talked in an unemotional and down-to-earth way, because sadly this is their daily experience.

It is clear that the allowance for school meals is far too small, ranging from just over £2 to £3. Just some toast for breakfast can cost from 40p to over £1. Many young people mentioned that a bottle of water can cost 90p. In a country that has clean water, that is ridiculous. No water should be sold. Water coolers should simply be provided, as already ordained in law, and children should be given something to drink from, whether clean cups or water bottles. That is absolutely critical. It is important to hear those young people describe the headaches they were getting from dehydration. We also heard about many catering services being outsourced. It was all about having a canteen that made a profit and not about one that was providing nutrition.

There is a cliff edge that means that even a tiny change in income can suddenly mean that children do not qualify for free school meals. Dev talked about coming to school feeling embarrassed because his packed lunch box had hardly anything in it. Working out who is eligible for free meals has become a lot harder since the introduction of universal credit. My local authority used to have an automatic system based on the benefits people received, but there are no ways of triggering that any more. We also heard about not having enough time to eat and food therefore being thrown away, while other children who were feeling hungry watched.

There is stigma. I lost my father a week before my third birthday, so I grew up on free school meals when there were different coloured tickets and those eligible stood in a different queue. People have mentioned that there are ways of avoiding that stigma, but, as the young people mentioned, everyone knows very quickly who is on free school meals; there is no hiding it. The simple approach is to make free school meals universal. England and Scotland have that system up to the age of 7, but Wales and Northern Ireland do not. In fact, investing in universal free school meals would be the most effective way of contributing to closing the attainment gap. Children who are mentally stressed or malnourished cannot learn. As I said at the launch of the report, I defy anyone to solve algebra when their stomach is hurting them because of hunger.

Governments have direct control over what our young people eat in school and that is where they could make changes. Outside school, Government do not have direct control, although they do have a lot of powers and levers. They could fund local authorities to tackle holiday hunger. In my constituency, North Ayrshire Council provides 23 centres that are open throughout the summer, providing activities and warm meals; that is an important provision in tackling holiday hunger. The APPG undertook a report two years ago, which has stimulated discussion at least. As was said earlier, when those children come back to school they have lost out educationally over the holidays. They are not being stimulated either, as there is no access to activities, and they are filling themselves up with carbohydrates, which are cheap. They may actually have gained weight over the summer.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned breastfeeding, which is the start of a young person in life, but the mother’s nutrition is also important, as that life actually starts at conception. People forget that if a pregnant woman is carrying a female child, that child will have all her eggs from the start; a woman is carrying two generations at one time. Therefore, if that child is malnourished during pregnancy, that is hitting two generations. Then comes breastfeeding, which requires promotion and support, as well as a health visitor or someone to check that the mother is not having problems. In England, half of infant feeding lead jobs have been cut and there is no breastfeeding strategy. In Scotland, we started at a worse level—as is often the case—but in the last 17 years breastfeeding has risen by 20%. In England the figure is drifting down, and we need to turn that around.

We heard that healthy food is three times more expensive than unhealthy food. Some 46% of advertising is about rubbish food and only 2.5% about fruit and vegetables. It is critical that we have a 9pm watershed. We have debated that for the four years that I have been in Parliament, yet there has still been no action. We need to tackle that or we will face an epidemic of type 2 diabetes, which results in people losing feet or legs. Having worked in a vascular unit, I spent two years of my life being part of those awful operations. People get stuck in hospital or stuck in care, and the quality of their lives is awful. The management of diabetes already costs NHS services £10 billion. Why do we not invest more of that money in our children, by making them healthy early in life?

It is critical that we have an independent children’s food watchdog. It must involve young people, be allowed to explore different innovative approaches across the four UK nations and produce reports that the Government must promise to listen to. If that does not happen, we will pay the price in trying to support those children when they are struggling when they are older. We need to invest in our children now, and we need to start by listening to their words in this report.
10.39 am

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing such a vital debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for the amount of work she has put in, over a considerable number of years, to chairing the APPG. Special thanks also go to the 15 young food ambassadors, all the young people and stakeholders who have offered their insights to this valuable report, and of course Dame Emma Thompson for giving the matter such a strong media profile, as well as for her impassioned work on the subject.

As we have heard, the report is an excellent and engaging piece of work, and it is all the more important because it involved young people so closely. As a result, it is something that all parties should give serious attention to. We on the Labour Benches would very much welcome consideration, and action in some parts of devolved Government.

It has been clear for some time, and made even clearer today, that we are facing a child poverty and child hunger crisis in our country, right from birth. For babies and pre-school years, the report raises serious concerns over support for breastfeeding—highlighted by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous)—policies to support babies in low-income households and food provision in early years and pre-school environments.

The report goes on to find that free school meal provision is inconsistent across the Westminster and devolved Governments, while expressing concern about the way the free school meal policy works, including concerns that the allowance is not sufficient to buy a meal, as hon. Members have pointed out, and the higher price of healthier food options. It also highlights issues related to advertising and access to cheap, fast food. For example, the report states that children from the poorest families are “more exposed to fast food outlets and more affected by the relatively higher costs of healthy food”.

Children, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire rightly pointed out, are becoming more obese, comparing London with the likes of Paris. Of course, that has drastic consequences for our nation’s health.

These findings should come as no surprise. Last month, the Trussell Trust published its annual statistics on food bank use, which show that in 2018-19 the trust distributed almost 1.6 million food parcels, of which 578,000 went to children—a fact highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who noted that 7,000 such parcels were distributed to local children in Durham. That is the highest level since the charity opened in 2013-14 and nearly a 75% increase in the past five years.

Furthermore, the Government’s own figures for households below average income, released in March, tell a shocking story: Child poverty is at 4.1 million, half a million more than in 2010, and beneath that headline charities such as the Child Poverty Action Group and others have even more concerns. Despite Government claims that work is the best route out of poverty, 70% of children in poverty now live in working households, up from 67% last year. Every time we hear a Government Minister talk about record levels of employment, they are also presiding over record levels of families working, only to continue in poverty.

The Child Poverty Action Group also finds that the face of child poverty is getting younger; the proportion of children living in poverty who are under the age of five has risen from 51% to 53%, representing over 2 million children. We know that these early years often define our children’s outcomes and expectations for a lifetime, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) argued.

Indeed, the inquiry report tells us:

“Up until their second birthday children’s brains and bodies are developing fast and laying down the foundation for the future. The food, energy and nutrients which children eat during this period determine how well they grow, how well they do at school and are also a good predictor of long-term health.”

Tragically, under the current Government, those years are increasingly being damaged by poverty and empty stomachs.

The picture is worsening for larger families too. The risk of poverty for children in families with three or more children has also gone up, from 32% in 2012 to 43% today. Will the Minister admit that his policies, such as the two-child limit, the benefit cap and universal credit, have helped to drive this scandal? If so, will he commit to doing something about it and reversing these unfair and callous policies?

Poverty and food poverty are, of course, about more than just numbers. Behind the statistics, as hon. Members across the Chamber have pointed out, are real children, real families and real experiences. The inquiry report gives us some chilling examples and experiences from the food ambassadors about their experiences of going hungry, or of living and working alongside children suffering from not having enough to eat.

We have heard many other stories from colleagues here today. Hon. Members have given us examples of families having to choose between paying for heating or food. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West spoke about the need for water dispensers, with thousands of children going thirsty day after day in the school environment. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) spoke about children’s experiences of being stigmatised by the way free school meals are currently administered. Those tales show us just how important it is to ensure that, in one of the richest countries in the world, all our children can have access to that most basic of rights: enough to eat so that they can live and learn without the pain of hunger.

Related to that point is the shocking observation in the report that children living in households who have migrated to the UK and been granted leave to remain with no recourse to public funds cannot claim free school meals. That is affecting thousands and thousands of the most vulnerable children—something the Government must address. Will the Minister commit to recording that data, which is not currently recorded, so that we can have a true picture of some of the starkest examples of hunger in this country?

Will the Minister also commit, as hon. Members across the House have advocated, to extending holiday provision throughout the UK and funding all local...
authorities to do that? We certainly welcome the announcement of the increase from £2 million to £9 million, but let us go further.

I will finish by once again thanking all those who have contributed to the report and the several hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I await the Minister’s answers with interest, while also recognising that we all have a responsibility to understand the true picture of child and food poverty in our country and to improve that picture for the future. We are certainly committed to doing so on the Labour benches, and I hope that the Government will respond as a matter of urgency to the five asks in the report.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on securing this important debate. I know it is an issue close to her heart, as a member of the committee for this important inquiry. I also take this opportunity to thank the young people and everyone else who contributed to the report.

I thank two people who are not in the room, Lindsay Graham and, of course, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), for their work in this area. The right hon. Gentleman certainly left an impression on me from the moment I got this job as the Children and Families Minister, and much of the work on the holiday activities and food programme is testament to his passion and commitment to this area.

I attended the launch of the inquiry’s report the other week—it has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members—and I was especially lucky to meet some of the young food ambassadors in person. They have been mentioned several times today, and I want to echo what has been said, extend to them my congratulations and state my commitment to continue to listen to them as they continue their work. I was struck by the bravery of those young people, how articulate they were and their commitment to work with one another to improve the lives of other children in their communities. I know that many of them, including Dev, whom the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned, are interested in pursuing a career in politics. All I can say is that if that is the calibre of politicians in the future, we are in safe hands.

The Government are committed to delivering a country that works for everyone, and all children should be able to access healthy and nutritious food at home and at school. I am determined to ensure that we target our resources to those most in need.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the Minister give way briefly?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will just get through this speech. There is a lot that I want to respond on, including why Bristol East, unlike Plymouth, did not get the funding—

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have very little time, and I want to address a number of the issues that were raised and, obviously, give the hon. Member for Bristol East a couple of minutes to respond, so I apologise, but I will not give way now. If I can at the end of my speech, I will certainly take interventions.

Clearly, there is much more to do. That was highlighted in the report, which raised some serious and important issues that we need to address. At the launch event, I promised to take the report away to consider it in detail and to formulate an official response. Although this speech does not constitute our formal response to the report, what I can say is that I have asked my team to work with the Food Foundation to look into setting up a working group to explore how we might provide greater oversight of children’s food, involving the young food ambassadors and other relevant Departments. I am happy to meet representatives of the Food Foundation to discuss that in more detail before the end of this month—diaries permitting, of course. I will also write to schools to remind them of their responsibilities on school food, including the need to provide access at all times to free, fresh drinking water. That issue has been mentioned several times today. I will respond formally to the report by the start of the new school year. That will give us a chance to test the response with the young food ambassadors when they meet in the school holidays. My Department is committed to ensuring that all children can access healthy food, both at school and beyond, and has put in place significant resources to ensure that that happens.

The holiday activities and food programme is exploring how we can better support children and young people during school holidays. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) mentioned expanding it. This is the second year of our research, and we will continue to try to understand what works. Last year, we awarded £2 million, as he mentioned, to holiday club providers to deliver free healthy food and enriching activities to about 18,000 children across the country. We have more than quadrupled the funding for the summer of 2019, when, as people may have heard earlier today, we will work with 11 organisations in all the regions of England. I am pleased to be able to tell the House, if hon. Members have not already heard, that the organisations and areas that we will be working with this summer are StreetGames in Newcastle—that organisation was mentioned by the hon. Member for Gateshead; the Leeds Community Foundation; Transforming Lives for Good, in Bradford; Edsential in the Cheshire West and Chester area; the Happy Healthy Holidays consortium in Birmingham; Barnardo’s in Leicestershire; Suffolk County Council; Family Action in Croydon; the Romsey School in Hampshire; and Plymouth City Council. Those organisations will co-ordinate and fund—

Dr Blackman-Woods: Will the Minister give way briefly?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will right at the end. I promise, if I can just get through this speech. There is a lot that I want to respond on, including why Bristol East, unlike Plymouth, did not get the funding—

Kerry McCarthy: And Durham.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Yes.

Nadhim Zahawi: And Durham. The organisations that I have listed will co-ordinate and fund provision across their area to ensure that those who need it can access it. They will work with providers to ensure that they meet our new set of minimum standards, including that the food they offer meets school food standards, and that children and young people attending the clubs—and their families where appropriate—are being taught...
about the importance of healthy food and given the skills, through cooking classes, to ensure that they can put those lessons into practice at home.

I have spoken before about how enormously proud I am of the breakfast club programme, which has been mentioned today. We are investing £26 million. A good breakfast sets children up for the day ahead, as colleagues have mentioned, and where children do not get that at home, we are committed to ensuring that schools are able to provide it. The breakfast club programme is setting up or improving more than 1,700 breakfast clubs in schools in the most disadvantaged areas across the country. I recently visited one such club in Battersea, and everyone involved was overwhelmingly positive about the impact that the club has had.

Free school meals have been mentioned. The Government are also committed to ensuring that the most disadvantaged children receive a healthy and nutritious lunch time meal at school. Last year, more than 1 million disadvantaged children were eligible for and claimed a free school meal. We have recently expanded free school meal provision to include further education colleges and implemented, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned, universal free school meals for all infant children in state-funded schools in England.

We estimate that under our revised criteria, introduced last April, for free school meals, more children will benefit from free meals by 2022, compared with the previous benefits system. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale talked about that. We have also introduced generous transitional protections, so that all children will keep their free meals during the change to the new criteria.

Another recommendation from the report was that any unspent free meal allowance should be carried over for pupils to use on subsequent days. Free school meals are intended as a benefit in kind, rather than a cash benefit; our primary interest is that schools meet their legal duties to provide nutritious free lunches to eligible children. However, schools absolutely have the freedom to do this if their local arrangements allow it, and I know that Carmel Education Trust, up in the north-east, is one body that has adopted this practice.

My Department’s school food standards mean that the food that children and young people access at school is healthy and nutritious and foods high in fat, salt and sugar are restricted. We are going even further by updating the standards to reduce sugar content even more. Of course, I acknowledge that these issues are related more to child health and obesity. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) spoke so eloquently about that and the relationship with diabetes and the scourge of that illness. But as we all know, obesity and poverty are related issues. Many colleagues have mentioned that they are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, many of the young people asked why unhealthy food is cheaper and more readily available than healthy alternatives. I was shocked to hear the young food ambassadors talking about not having access to free water at school, and I will include that in my letter when I write to schools.

My time is limited. I thank all colleagues who have spoken. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West spoke about free school meals and the allowance. We will look at that in the spending review. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) eloquently told his pineapple story, as I will refer to it, and quoted a young man named Aaron. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) referred to her own mother’s experience of being a school cook and talked about holiday activities, which I will hopefully write to her on. The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) talked about behavioural challenges. I have been to that wonderful town to look at our opportunity area there.

I want to end there to allow the hon. Member for Bristol East to respond. The only other thing I will say is that I have lots of responses to colleagues’ points and I will write to them if I have not responded fully in my remarks today.

Kerry McCarthy: In the very short time I have, I do not want to appear churlish, but as has been made clear, my brilliant hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) have been campaigning on this issue since we were all elected in 2005. I am sure that the young food ambassadors and the Food Foundation will seize the opportunity that the Minister has suggested, but I do not think we need pilots to find out what works on holiday hunger. I do not think we need working groups. I think we need to get on with tackling the problems that have been identified and particularly the underlying problems, which the Minister has not mentioned at all. I am talking about things such as the roll-out of universal credit, benefit sanctions and so on. I urge the Minister to look at those, too.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered the report of the Children’s Future Food Inquiry.
Military Aircraft Manufacturing

11 am

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the future of military aircraft manufacturing in the UK.

It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. To avoid any doubt, if during the course of the debate I refer to the Eurofighter, I am referring to an aircraft and not to Euro-fighters such as yourself—a Euro-fighter in a very different context.

The aerospace sector in general is a key driver of the UK manufacturing economy. In 2017 the industry contributed £6.6 billion to the UK economy, amounting to about 4% of total manufacturing output. Across the length and breadth of our nation, 900 businesses were involved, employing in excess of 90,000 people. I want to focus on the defence and military section within that.

The aerospace sector has accounted for 87% of defence exports over the past 10 years. The UK combat air sector has an annual turnover of over £6 billion, supporting 18,000 jobs. In the supply chain on programmes such as Typhoon, more than 10,000 full-time equivalents have been employed over the past 10 years, with 40,000 people involved at the peak of the programme. There are over 1,000 companies nationwide, in defence, aerospace and associated industries.

My constituency of Fylde is home to the Warton and Samlesbury business units. In Warton, BAE Systems employs 6,200 staff, who focus on Typhoon, Hawk and the future air platforms currently being worked on by the Government. At the Samlesbury business unit, the F-35 programme is being generated. Between those two sites, over 10,000 people are employed. I am very proud that my part of Lancashire plays an integral part in the UK’s defence manufacturing sector.

The purpose of this debate is not to criticise the Government’s work, because the Government have been very committed. I commend the current Minister and his predecessors, as well as the Prime Minister, for the focus that has been given to military aircraft strategy. It is important that the Government recognise the importance of retaining sovereign defence capability. Any fool can go out and buy aircraft that are manufactured overseas, but it takes something quite remarkable to invest in this country’s sovereign capability.

It is very important that we do not lose sight of the fact that we retain such a significant work share in the F-35 programme because of the capability that the United Kingdom was able to put on the table. That capability had been generated over decades from programmes as far back as Harrier, as well as the Typhoon programme. Without investing in sovereign capability in design, build and development, if we seek a place at the table on which to focus that has been given to military aircraft strategy. It is incredibly important that the United Kingdom plays a significant role in shaping Typhoon, so that we do not lose any of that ability, which we hold so dear.

When it comes to sovereign capability, we are reaching a point where our workforce, which holds the skills required in the sector, may run out of work, and redundancies will follow. That is why it is crucial that the Government continue their support for the Typhoon export programme. The work currently taking place at Warton is for our export partners, which, in the case of Typhoon in Warton, is Qatar. If the supply chain is allowed to grind to a halt due to lack of export orders, we will lose not only the people and skills, but the ability and cash needed to innovate and invest.

Therefore, it is important that those who lament or complain about the United Kingdom’s defence export strategy do not lose sight of the tens of thousands of men and women—and apprentices—whose jobs depend on that carefully controlled export strategy. I urge the Government to work closely with our partners in Germany, to ensure that their decision to block export licences to some of our key export partners does not have a catastrophic impact on the UK’s defence manufacturing system.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Everyone here will be aware of the work of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, including the dinners that it hosts here, and those who sponsor those events. At those events we gather knowledge and we get a sense of the importance of those companies to all the regions of the United Kingdom. There is a labour skills base in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which we need to utilise to its full capability. Does he agree that, when it comes to the advantages of military aircraft manufacture in the UK, every region has a part to play?

Mark Menzies: The hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point.

I will now focus on the national value framework aspect of the combat air strategy, which states that the UK must consider a number of items. For example, it is important to maintain military capabilities and our

Mark Menzies: My hon. Friend is very modest. He also represents a constituency with a substantial defence footprint, and he has dedicated much of his career in this place to fighting for the workforce and the interests of the companies he represents. His point is solid. Across the whole range of skills and technologies that building a modern, sophisticated aircraft platform gives us—whether in avionics, engine design, low radar signature and so on—it is critical that having that sovereign capability not only allows us to influence the manufacturing programmes that we may become part of, but is an incredible part of the UK’s strategic relationship with our key allies. That is something we must never lose sight of.

The combat air strategy, which the Government outlined in Farnborough in 2018, sets out the ambition for a new combat aircraft, expected to come into force in the 2030s. Government and industry have pledged over £2 billion over the next decade to the future combat air systems technology initiative. Team Tempest has also been created. That is welcome, but it is not likely to remain sovereign, due to cost; the reality is that we will need international partners, as we have done with Typhoon and Tornado, and with programmes as far back as Jaguar. It is incredibly important that the United Kingdom plays a significant role in shaping Typhoon, so that we do not lose any of that ability, which we hold so dear.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is making an interesting and excellent speech. The economic benefits are obvious to see, as are the benefits of having those capabilities for domestic defence. Does he agree that having those world-leading sovereign capabilities also allows us to influence strategic decision-making processes on an international basis?
ability to respond quickly and effectively to threats. We must maintain choice in our future combat air capability and acquisition. We must sustain investment in highly skilled jobs throughout the supply chain, the contribution to the UK’s science, technology, engineering and maths skills base, the development of high-end technologies, and the influence on international and trade relationships.

Above all, we need to ensure that we protect the UK’s operational, technological and economic advantage, and the ability, when required, to act independently, freely and at will. As part of any future strategy, we must also ensure that the needs and future requirements of the RAF are central and critical.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is making a powerful speech and I agree with everything he has said thus far. Does he agree that to sustain the supply chain, which is an important focus of the national value proposition that he has just made and of his earlier remarks, it is important that the Government’s combat air strategy is backed up by contracts? That will allow the primes involved in Team Tempest and the supply chain that will support them to start investing to ensure that we maintain the design and engineering skills at the highest level for such a strategy to have an effect.

Mark Menzies: It comes as no surprise that my right hon. Friend’s intervention is full of facts and knowledge, because he speaks as a former Minister for Defence Procurement. He is right that the people involved in the early stage of the development of platforms such as Team Tempest need that assurance and they need contracts to come through. It is important that the money that the Government have already committed at Farnborough, which I understand is part of the overall £2 billion envelope, begins to feed through into live programmes and work, and not just at large organisations such as BAE Systems, but at many of the smaller organisations within the supply chain. An aircraft supply chain is not a light that can be switched on and off; we have to maintain the drumbeat and ensure that programmes have work coming through and that innovation has a purpose.

On Team Tempest, is it possible for the Minister to update us today on where we are at with regard to building partnerships with other partner nations? What does that international collaborative effort look like? Where does he think we can go in terms of not only building a platform that is flexible in meeting the needs of the RAF, but ensuring that the platform is highly exportable and can take on the likes of France and the United States, which have several aircraft platforms that will fill a number of key segments of the export market? If we do not have an exportable aircraft as part of our future programme, and we rely solely on RAF orders or orders placed by partner nations, the programme will not be able to sustain the UK manufacturing sector in future.

I thank the Minister for the work that he and his predecessors have done to drive innovation within the manufacturing sector, but I urge him to look at programmes such as Hawk. Although it is not as shiny or exciting as future programmes such as Tempest, it is the solid trainer aircraft that we have depended on for the past 30-plus years, and it is fair to say that it is the only military aircraft that the United Kingdom manufactures throughout.

I pay tribute to the trade unions representatives, particularly from Brough, who come down, speak to members and get their points across. I urge the Minister to continue to work with the trade union movement in the military aircraft sector to ensure that we have a united team building a platform for the future and ensuring the UK’s manufacturing base. With that, I will conclude and give him time to respond.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) on securing the debate and on his work for many of his constituents. He often grabs me in the corridor to raise issues that are of concern to him and them. As he rightly said, his constituency has a proud tradition in military aviation. Over recent years, BAE Systems Military Air & Information at Warton has been the central assembly facility for the Eurofighter Typhoon. That was one of the first visits I made when I was appointed to this job, and the passion that goes through that company was clear, from the management to the workforce. We should be proud of what it has done.

The area has a strong heritage. Warton was originally the base of English Electric and the testing ground for the legendary Lightning fighter—the supersonic interceptor of the 1960s and 1970s, rather than today’s world-beating F-35 Lightning II stealth jet. It is doubly appropriate, therefore, that the debate has highlighted the proud history of the UK in the field.

Let us make no mistake that the UK remains a global leader in military aerospace for three reasons. The first reason, which my hon. Friend touched on, is innovation. We have a long heritage of leading the world in aerospace thinking—in taking cutting-edge industrial, technical and scientific know-how from the drawing board to cutting-edge military capability. The first purpose-built air-to-air combat fighter was designed and built in Britain, as was the first vertical take-off and landing aircraft. That heritage remains undiminished.

The second reason is our history of successful international collaboration in producing some of the best military aircraft in the world, such as Jaguar, Tornado and Typhoon, with our partners on the continent, and now the F-35 with the United States, as my hon. Friend pointed out. The third reason is the strength of our domestic combat air sector, which has created skilled jobs and prosperity not just in his constituency, but across the nation.

It is worth mentioning the recent successes for the UK industry in the sector. Programmes such as the F-35 are creating considerable industrial benefit, with 15% of the value of more than 3,000 airframes being built by British industry. The Government are also delighted with the UK’s recent success in securing another batch of F-35 avionic and aircraft component repair work, which will bring an additional £500 million of work to north Wales and secure hundreds of skilled jobs. Overall, the combat air sector has an annual turnover of more than £6 billion. It directly supports more than 18,000 skilled jobs across the UK and many more in the wider supply chain, which are equally important.
To maintain and strengthen the sector’s competitive international position, the Government established the £2 billion future combat air system technology initiative following the “Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015”. That initiative sustains investment in the sector to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of developing the next generation of technological capability.

Last year, the Government further demonstrated their commitment to the sector by launching the combat air strategy at the Farnborough international airshow, as my hon. Friend said. The strategy defined a clear vision for the sector that preserves our long-standing national advantages in the field and our freedom of action in deciding how our combat air capability is delivered. All future combat air decisions will be based on a national value framework that takes full account of our armed forces’ requirements, the contribution to the nation’s industrial capacity and prosperity, and the significant benefits that military aviation provides to our international influence.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As the Minister knows, the Defence Committee is quite worried that not enough is being done to protect the defence industrial base. In advance of his appearance before us on 21 May, when we will look into some of these subjects, can he tell us how much consideration is given to the knock-on benefits of investing in production in the UK rather than buying off the shelf, given that the money spent is then channelled back into the British economy?

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention, and I say with some trepidation that I am looking forward to appearing before his Committee in a couple of weeks’ time. He is absolutely right to raise that important issue. We are doing a tremendous amount of work across the Department, and a lot of it is of course the focus of the fantastic report by our right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) on the important prosperity that the defence industry can bring. We are also engaging a lot with small and medium-sized enterprises around the country to encourage more of them to take part in many of the competitions, and to ensure that they do more business with defence. Wherever we build new platforms, we are encouraging wider prosperity among those in the supply chain in the United Kingdom.

I know there has been some controversy about some of the platforms we are buying from overseas, but we are working with these industries to ensure that they work closely with the UK supply chain, so that we can increase the prosperity that comes about because of the platforms we are buying. For example, Boeing recently took a lot of SMEs over to the United States to talk through how they can bid for business from that company. Of course, Boeing has made investments in this country, through how they can bid for business from that company. It is a model that we should see from other businesses in thedefence sector. The aim of our work is to inform other businesses around the Lancashire area, and it really is a model that we should see from other businesses in the defence sector. The aim of our work is to inform crucial decisions on future skills investment in a fast-moving international environment, where technological practice changes continually.

I will just come on to some of the points that were raised in the debate, and I will shortly talk about some of our engagement with industry, to respond to his point a bit further.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for taking an intervention on that point. I congratulate him for having been delayed in a Select Committee, and I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I was very interested in the answer the Minister gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) vis-à-vis investing in the defence base of this country, and, of course, I agree 100% with that. However, with regard to the combat air sector, I was encouraged by the Minister’s comments about Team Tempest. Could he update the House as to whether there has been any further discussion as regards international partners in that programme going forward?

Stuart Andrew: I will come on to those points in a minute. A number of points were raised in the debate that I will happily respond to when I have finished these remarks.

As part of the wider strategy programme, my Department has now launched its next-generation combat air acquisition programme. This will develop the capabilities that the RAF will need to replace Typhoon when it goes out of service in 2040. The programme’s two-year concept phase has now begun, following my approval of the strategic outline case.

Furthermore, new forums have now been established to explore the possibilities for collaboration with other military aerospace partners. Early discussions have gone well, and my Department will provide more detailed updates in the summer. However, I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) that we are having very detailed conversations with a number of our partners around the world because we recognise that, for this process to be effective and, importantly, affordable when we deliver it, and, probably even more critically, because of the importance of interoperability, it is vital that we have partner nations on board. However, as I say, those discussions are still ongoing. I hope I will be able to update the House on them later this year.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the Minister acknowledge that, although the commitment the Government have shown towards the Tempest programme is to be welcomed, if the project is to come to fruition, that will require much more investment by the Government than they are presently committed to?

Stuart Andrew: We are in the early stages at the moment, and I will shortly talk about some of our engagement with industry, to respond to his point a bit further.

The other thing that is really important, and it is in parallel to this work, is that fact that my Department is actively identifying and monitoring the health of the sector’s skill base, which my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde mentioned. When I visited Samlesbury, I was very impressed by the BAE Systems training centre next door. That centre is helping not only the sector but a lot of businesses around the Lancashire area, and it really is a model that we should see from other businesses in the defence sector. The aim of our work is to inform crucial decisions on future skills investment in a fast-moving international environment, where technological practice changes continually.

I will just come on to some of the points that were raised in the debate. The first was the issue of exports. My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde was absolutely right to say that this is an incredibly important part of the work that we do. Personally, I have tried to invest a significant amount of my time in support of some of the export campaigns. We are working with Finland at the moment to see whether we can be successful in their competition, which is worth in the region of €6 billion...
to €10 billion. Finland has launched a competition for the acquisition of 64 fighter aircraft to replace its ageing fleet. That competition is a closely fought one, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we will do everything we can.

As for Saudi Arabia, we continue to make progress on the Typhoon batch 2 negotiations. The latest offer is a very strong package, and it would provide enduring industrial capability in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which would also establish many of the industrial components needed to realise that country’s vision of 2030.

My hon. Friend was right to mention the export issues and the licensing issues, and we are working closely with the German Government to ensure that those are resolved. Equally, we are working together with Airbus on the campaign to supply Canada with a replacement for its F-18—it is currently running a competition to find that replacement.

Other points were raised in the debate. There was the issue that my hon. Friend mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow in the prosperity agenda. We are working closely with four main businesses at the moment: BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Leonardo and MBDA. Recently, I was pleased to attend a Team Tempest industry day, which over 150 companies attended so that they could get the briefs they needed and the capabilities and skills that will be required to facilitate the next generation. The Tempest partners are now very actively engaged with about a hundred of those companies. So that engagement is happening and, as I have said, I hope we will be able to make more announcements in the coming weeks.

I have talked about the partner nations. The innovation side is obviously incredibly important. The innovation fund is helpful, and the whole aspect of this future combat air strategy will be incredibly important for that.

My hon. Friend also mentioned Hawk, which I know has been a challenging issue. I have visited Kuwait on two occasions now, trying to personally support the very active campaign that BAE Systems and the Government have pursued there. I pay tribute to the trade unions; they are very active in making their case. I also pay tribute to BAE Systems, which is trying to keep things going at Brough while we see whether we can make any announcements.

I hope I have demonstrated in this debate, which I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde on securing, that we are doing everything we can to maintain the necessary skills and knowledge, as well as to retain our ability to have the combat air sector that we really need. I assure the House that the Government will continue to work in full partnership with our world-leading military aviation sector, maintaining its position at the cutting edge of technological development, and supporting the jobs and prosperity that it brings right across the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of military aircraft manufacturing in the UK.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Commonwealth Personnel in the Armed Forces

[Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move.

That this House has considered fair treatment for Commonwealth personnel in the armed forces.

I am pleased to have been granted this debate today, Mr Sharma, and to speak under your chairmanship. I thank right hon. and hon. Members who have joined us for today’s debate.

We often speak in this place about the need to support veterans and their families after they have served our country. However, there is now clear evidence that the Commonwealth personnel serving in the armed forces are being left behind. It is a duty of this and any Government to support all those who serve in the armed forces, including those from Commonwealth nations who serve with distinction alongside their comrades from the UK and Ireland. Commonwealth citizens have long made significant contributions to the defence of the United Kingdom, including during the first and second world wars. They continue to play an important role in the UK armed forces, serving in operations worldwide.

The tradition of soldiers recruited from across the Commonwealth and other former colonies serving in the British armed forces is the legacy of a time when Britain had an extensive military role in garrisoning and policing the largest empire in the world. Indeed, the Brigade of Gurkhas has celebrated over two centuries of continuous loyal service to Britain, initially under the command of the East India Company from 1814, then within the British Indian Army from 1895, and continuing within the British Army after the 1947 decolonisation of India until the present day.

Commonwealth soldiers, like all members of the armed forces, are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the defence of our country. I believe that all armed forces personnel, regardless of their background or country of origin, should be treated equally and with gratitude. Much like ordinary civilians, Commonwealth soldiers are being unfairly treated by the Home Office, which is not doing enough to end the hostile environment it has created at immense cost to society. Given the ongoing recruitment crisis and the Government’s recent decision to recruit more Commonwealth personnel, it is all the more urgent that the Government review any recruitment barriers. The Labour party recognises the immense debt that we owe to all personnel, veterans and their families, and the need to ensure that they have the very best support. Today, I call upon the Government to do the same.

According to the Royal British Legion, over 6,000 personnel from foreign and Commonwealth countries are currently serving in the UK armed forces, with more recruited each year to fill technical and specialist roles. In 2018 the Army employed approximately 4.5% of its personnel—or 5,290—from foreign and Commonwealth nations. Although the figure has been the main recipient of Commonwealth recruits, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force also recruit from Commonwealth countries. The majority of those recruits come from countries in Africa, the Caribbean, Nepal and Fiji in the Pacific; they are also generally concentrated in non-commissioned ranks and within infantry units. That is despite the Conservative Government cutting the size of the regular Army from a peak of 114,000 in 2010 to a target size of 82,000 by 2020, and privatising recruitment to a company called Capita in 2012. However, in July 2018 the Army was 5,600, or about 7%, short of the number of regulars needed, and it is highly unlikely to meet its target headcount for 2020.

The Army and Capita have not recruited the number of regulars and reserves needed to sustain the required headcount in any year since the contract began, even though that headcount has been heavily reduced. The total annual shortfall has ranged from 21% to 45% of the Army’s annual requirements. To illustrate the contrast, in the two years before the contract with Capita began, the annual shortfall was just 4%. In late 2018 the Ministry of Defence announced its intention to increase further its reliance on Commonwealth personnel, as home recruitment continues to chronically underperform. It aims to recruit 1,350 personnel per annum, including expanding the Brigade of Gurkhas by more than 800 posts and extending the right for women to join, too.

However, the immigration status of the Gurkhas and other Commonwealth personnel has been a significant matter of contention over the past two decades, led most notably by the Gurkha Justice Campaign. Until 2004, Gurkhas were not allowed to settle in the United Kingdom. The Labour Government under Tony Blair changed the rules to allow Gurkhas who retired after 1997 to settle in the UK, because 1997 was the year in which the Gurkhas’ brigade headquarters transferred from Hong Kong to Britain. In May 2009, following a campaign by Gurkha veterans, Gordon Brown’s Labour Government announced that all Gurkha veterans who had served four years or more in the British Army before 1997 would also be allowed to settle in Britain.

It seems to me extraordinary that our country placed such barriers to citizenship in the way of those who served this nation so gallantly in the first place. In my opinion, this situation reveals a latent neo-colonial mentality in the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office when it comes to championing the equal right of those who have served us in uniform to become British citizens.

Commonwealth personnel are exempt from UK immigration controls throughout their service, but that exemption is removed immediately upon discharge. Former personnel who wish to stay in the United Kingdom indefinitely, whether with their family or alone, are required to apply for indefinite leave to remain. In alignment with civilian applicants for indefinite leave to remain, veterans are subject to several requirements, including four years’ qualifying residency in the United Kingdom—which, of course, is obtainable via four years’ service in the armed forces. However, veterans are also subject to a non-refundable fee of £2,389 per person. Fees for indefinite leave to remain have risen by 127% in the past five years, to £2,389 per person—since they were introduced in 2003, those fees have risen by 1,441%. The Royal British Legion has said that it provided £56,000 in grants over the past year alone to help pay for those visa fees, which is money that could have been spent on any number of better and more direct veteran support services. What an appalling diversion of time, effort and resource.
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. As he rightly highlights, Commonwealth soldiers have long made significant contributions to the defence of our country, including during the first and second world wars, and they continue to do so to this day. However, they are now being charged exorbitant fees by the Government when making Home Office applications, which is frankly appalling given their immense sacrifices. Does he agree that it is high time the Government ended the hostile environment that they have created?

Mr Sweeney: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that contribution, and for reiterating the frustration that many feel about the Government’s wrong-headed position.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am slightly conscious of the manner in which the debate is already going. I simply interject about the use of the words “hostile environment”, because I hope that there will be cross-party consensus on where we want to take this issue. I invite the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) to urge caution on such language. The fees for those from the Commonwealth who serve in our armed forces are the same fees that everybody must pay, no matter where they are from. Those people are not being targeted, and nor are those fees part of any form of hostile environment. I simply invite the hon. Gentleman to keep the debate as elevated as possible, rather than getting down into some political rut.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the Minister for his sentiments. The term “hostile environment” is born of persistent and comprehensive observation of the behaviour of the Home Office across a number of different fronts. It does not pertain particularly to service personnel; that is merely another permutation of how it harms quality of life, including that of our armed forces personnel. I am encouraged by the Minister’s aspiration to reach consensus on this issue, which I share, but I also acknowledge that there is a significant problem within our immigration system. I believe that our armed forces personnel should be treated as exceptional cases. That is the thrust of my argument today, which I will elaborate on further as we go forward.

I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) about the costs associated with service leavers applying for indefinite leave to remain. A service leaver who wants their partner to join them with indefinite leave to remain faces a bill of £4,778 to continue to live in the UK, even before children and further dependants are taken into account. Furthermore, immigration rules state that a foreign worker must earn an income threshold of £18,600 to apply to bring their spouse to the UK. In addition to that £18,600 threshold, the minimum income requirement to bring over one child is £22,400, with an additional £2,400 for each child thereafter. To put that into context, a soldier’s basic pay after training is just £18,600 a year; as a single person, they are right on the threshold.

It is difficult to understand just how vital the support of friends and family is to serving personnel who, during tours of duty in conflict zones, work antiscocial hours in conditions that are often appalling. Impeding the opportunity for those who serve to have their families living with them, providing that close emotional support, seems to me particularly callous. Considering the general concentration of Commonwealth troops in the lower ranks, and the fact that they require permission from their superiors and commanding officers to take up weekend work in order to earn sufficient money to achieve those income thresholds, doing so can be exceptionally difficult and put those troops under significant emotional hardship.

The Army Families Federation, which has also been investigating the issue, believes that up to 500 troops are affected. The AFF told The Times that it has been contacted by around a dozen soldiers separated from their children, and that Army chaplains and welfare officers have reported tearful troops in despair over their situation. There are also concerns that Commonwealth soldiers are not always aware of the issues prior to joining the UK armed forces, and it comes as a very unwelcome and distressing shock when they realise the limitations they face.

A recent Defence Committee report recognised that the vast majority of veterans leave the services with no ill effects. It is important to acknowledge that reality, but the report maintained that although the Government have made improvements in the care available to personnel leaving the armed forces, it was none the less the case that “some serving personnel, veterans and their families who need mental health care are still being completely failed by the system.” That is not good enough. It might not be typical, but it is certainly not good enough.

For some Commonwealth veterans who struggle with mental health, there is also a serious threat of deportation in addition to any other concerns they might have. I have spoken several times of the struggles that many veterans experience with their mental health. It has often been discussed in debates—some familiar faces are here. I have personal experience of people who have suffered and been affected by those problems. As I have mentioned before, the Royal Regiment of Scotland lost four soldiers and ex-soldiers last year through a spate of suicides. That caused great concern and worry about what that meant for the wider generation of soldiers who have served on operations in recent years. Reflecting further, more than 70 veterans have taken their own lives in the past year, which is very troubling. The death toll has exceeded the number of battlefield fatalities in 11 of the 13 years that British forces were operational in Herrick in Afghanistan. That is a pretty devastating statistic.

Four in 10 service families who have requested access to and been referred for mental health care have had difficulty accessing that treatment. That is not good enough and we need to do more. Many of our veterans experience great frustration when it comes to mental health support. Having approached people to get that level of support, they do not get the level of rigour that they deserve, leading to the despair we have seen, culminating in spates of veteran suicides. No veteran deserves that—not those originating from the UK, and not those from the Commonwealth. It is heartbreaking that some individuals could have their mental health affected by the lingering threat of deportation and immigration concerns after retiring from the armed forces.

I was pleased to see that a cross-party group of more than 130 MPs, co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), have written to the Home Secretary calling for the fees to be scrapped. I
would like to add my late support to that today. I did not have the opportunity to sign the letter itself, but I thoroughly endorse its sentiments. The letter is indicative of the scale of the problem and the groundswell of support from Members from all parties who want to see this issue gripped and properly addressed with the greatest sense of urgency.

I will therefore finish with some direct questions to the Minister. First, will he speak to the Home Secretary and the Home Office to secure a reply to the cross-party letter on the issue of visa fees, because Members are yet to receive a reply? Will the Government do the right thing and immediately scrap visa fees for armed forces veterans applying for indefinite leave to remain and, furthermore, grant them the unique right to apply for immediate British citizenship without limit of time? Finally, will the Government, in recognition of the huge debt we owe to our veterans, issue an apology to the veterans from the Commonwealth and their families who have been forced to pay these extortionate fees, despite their service to our country, and set up a mechanism to compensate those who have suffered financial detriment?

The Windrush scandal and ongoing examples of the Home Office’s policies in this regard demonstrate that our asylum and immigration system is badly failing and appallingly lacking in compassion and efficiency. Anyone who represents constituencies with a large population of immigrants or people seeking asylum will be all too aware of how the Home Office treats them. The attitude with which service personnel—just the latest manifestation, harming the very people who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice by laying down their lives in defence of our country. The very least we can do in recognition of their service is to grant them and their families the right to full British citizenship at the end of their service and to bring true equality to all those who serve in our armed forces, regardless of their country of origin.

2.44 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I should declare an interest at the beginning of my speech, because, possibly like you, Mr Sharma, I am, to some extent, a child of the Commonwealth, having spent my early years in Kenya. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing this debate for all of us in a crowded Commons diary. This is an important issue for those who most respect the role of the Commonwealth and of the UK in the Commonwealth, and the contribution the two make together to the world. In particular, through the peacekeeping efforts of our armed forces, our Commonwealth servicemen and women make a contribution to global peace. It is also worth referring to the fact that the hon. Gentleman is, I think, one of only three Labour party reservists on the Benches of the House of Commons. He has served in the Signals and the Royal Regiment of Scotland, so he knows of what he talks, and I think we would all recognise his contribution.

I want to focus on one aspect of the role of Commonwealth servicemen and women in our armed forces, which is the one that the hon. Gentleman referred to. It refers back to the cross-party letter that I organised with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who has a distinguished role in the NATO Parliament. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East has decided to add his signature to that letter today, which takes the number of Members of Parliament who have signed to 134, remembering always that those on the Front Benches on both sides are unable to sign such letters. It is fair to say that the letter is representative of a large body of feeling in the House of Commons.

The key points on the visa fees for Commonwealth armed forces personnel have been alluded to by the hon. Gentleman, but I would like to add two or three things. First, I did not start on this issue—nor did the hon. Member for Bridgend—from a position that Commonwealth servicemen were being unfairly treated, and least of all that they were in a “hostile environment”. That was not really our starting point, if I might distinguish the tone of the letter we wrote from the opening speech in this debate.

In fact, our issue is more about the fact that they are treated exactly like everyone else, including Commonwealth policemen and women or others in different occupations in this nation. Our point was that, since those who join our armed forces do so in the knowledge that they may be required to risk life and limb for our country, they therefore hold a special place in the respect of the nation and of all of us who serve in the House of Commons representing our constituents. In a sense, they occupy a special place.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who would give their lives in defence of this nation. Does he agree that the position in this country sits uneasily with that in other countries, such as the United States, where service in the military, either during peacetime or on active service, entitles that individual, ordinarily speaking, to be naturalised as a US citizen for the payment of no money at all? That is a proper expression of the debt of gratitude that a nation owes to those who serve in its armed forces.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as so often, in highlighting the issue. It boils down to a perception, at the least, of meanness on the part of our state. That does not reflect the respect that we hold for our Commonwealth servicemen and women, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East highlighted, and as my hon. Friend rightly reiterates. That is an issue for us, particularly at a time when we are in the chair of the Commonwealth. We are responsible for having created the Commonwealth, and play such an important role in it. It is important that we recognise the value of the contribution that Commonwealth personnel make, and the risks that they run, as highlighted by the recent armed forces presence in Afghanistan, for example.

It can, of course, be argued that we should not use longer term access to indefinite leave to remain in this country as, effectively, a recruiting incentive. That should not be the primary reason why Commonwealth servicemen and women join our armed forces, and I am very conscious of that. I do not believe that that is the case, but it is something the Home Secretary will have to balance. I know that the Minister is sympathetic to the cause of ensuring that fees are, at the very least, kept to a minimum, if not, as I and the hon. Member for Bridgend hope, effectively abolished completely. He will no doubt wish to comment on that.
Let me touch on one or two relevant issues, which the Home Secretary will have to consider. First, there is the issue of equality. If a special case is made for those serving in our armed forces—there is a perfectly good case for that on precisely the grounds already mentioned—the Department will have to be sure that that would not trigger a series of legal claims from those serving in other Departments where there are different risks, such as the police.

The campaign that we have triggered through the letter is also, importantly, a campaign of the Royal British Legion, which has a large membership and following in this country, and has been extremely helpful in providing me and others with relevant information, partly through freedom of information requests. One of the difficulties for the Royal British Legion, and for us, in bringing this issue alive through the media and social media is the shortage of case studies, because most of the people involved are serving servicemen and women who do not necessarily want the publicity that would go with that. That makes this a harder campaign than others with which I, and others Members present, have been involved.

Although the responses from Ministers in the Ministry of Defence are incredibly helpful, and I hope the Minister will be able to share his support and enthusiasm for this cause, it will ultimately be the Home Office’s responsibility to make a decision. I suspect that the Home Secretary will have to consider other issues, including the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East on the income levels of those coming to live in this country. That will open all sorts of other issues more widely than just in the armed forces.

I do not think for a moment that the Home Secretary is delaying his response to the campaign that the hon. Member for Bridgend and I started. I spoke to him earlier today. He will respond formally, and will meet the hon. Member for Bridgend and me, and the Royal British Legion, shortly on this issue. He will do his best to find the best way through the various challenges, and I do not doubt his instinctive sympathy and support. However, as we know, it can sometimes be hard to find a precise way through what appears to be a relatively simple issue, owing to the legal issues involved.

I hope all Members present will continue to engage with local branches of the Royal British Legion to show support for its campaign. I have encouraged the Royal British Legion to do various things that will bring the campaign alive, such as sharing through social media photographs of as many Commonwealth servicemen and women as possible, in different units of our armed forces, so that our constituents have a wider understanding of how many people from the Commonwealth are serving our country to the best of their ability. Anyone who has not yet signed the letter to the Home Secretary is welcome to do so, even though it has already gone, to show their support for this campaign with the Royal British Legion, and to support the debate that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East has rightly brought to the House today.

2.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who has clearly put over his support for the campaign. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for presenting the case very well for all Members who will speak in the debate. I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place. I echo the thoughts that he expressed earlier: we can reach consensus today, and move forward in a constructive and helpful way. I also declare an interest as a former part-time member of the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Territorial Army.

I am honoured to stand side by side with my brethren—I use that word very clearly—in every arm of the armed forces, from the Parachute Regiment, which is facing persecution, to the Gurkhas, who fought for years for recognition. One of those campaigns is concluded; the other is still to be concluded. It is my belief that every person who wears a uniform and honourably serves deserves the gratitude and support of a nation that sleeps safely in bed due to their sacrifice. It is very simple for me; I think it is very simple for us all.

I have had the chance to participate in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, along with other Members present. Through that scheme, we meet many serving Commonwealth members who qualify for the British Army because of their Commonwealth attachments and their years of service. I am encouraged by those I have met, and by their clear commitment. Part of what we are trying to do today is to support their families—we cannot ignore them.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Mental health and suicide were mentioned earlier. Does my hon. Friend agree that the welfare of our soldiers is vital, as well as that of their partners, children and families, who may go through the trauma of losing a loved one, or of a loved one sustaining life-changing injuries? I am sure that he agrees that it is important that families are looked after as well.

Jim Shannon: Thank you for your intervention. I wholeheartedly agree with that, as I think all Members in the Chamber would.

The background to this issue is clear. In November 2018, the five-year residency requirement for Commonwealth personnel wishing to enlist in the UK armed forces was removed in the hopes of increasing the number of Commonwealth recruits to 1,350 per year. Having met some of those recruits and serving members, I realise just how important it is to have Commonwealth soldiers in our British Army.

That seems simple enough, but for Commonwealth soldiers who wish to bring family to the UK a number of requirements must be met for those family members to enter and remain. That is the crux of this debate. The Library produced a helpful briefing, which summed up the requirement admirably, stating:

“In addition to a valid passport and visa, individuals must also meet the English language requirement and suitability criteria relating to certain criminal convictions, including previous breaches of the UK’s immigration laws. Primarily, however, there is a Minimum Income Requirement which a Commonwealth soldier must meet before they can bring family to the UK.”

We know the minimum requirement, because we deal with constituents in our offices every day, but in the particular case of soldiers, gross annual income must be at least £18,600, with an additional £3,800 for the first child and an additional £2,400 for each additional child thereafter. For a partner with no children, it is £18,600. For one child in addition to the partner, it is £22,400. For two children in addition to the partner, it is £24,800.
For three children in addition to the partner, it is £27,200. There are no exemptions from the requirement, and the guidance states:

“If you cannot meet the requirement, then you are advised not to apply to bring your family over”.

If we have asked that person to come and serve in the British Army, is it not right that they should be able to bring their families? I think it is. This debate is clearly trying to arrive at that.

As a result of the requirement, many Commonwealth soldiers leave their families at home, and some are taking second jobs to meet the affordability criteria. I will mention one such soldier later.

I was pleased to hear that there has been a move to improve awareness of immigration issues in the chain of command, and I thank the Minister for that, but I stand on the armed forces covenant, which I have spoken about in the House many times, and the current scenario that separates families in service is, in my opinion, a clear breach of that covenant. It is unfair to separate people who serve in the British Army and their families, wherever they may be. To pay our Commonwealth soldiers a wage that does not allow them to qualify for immigration, or to expect to be able to bring their families with them, is unacceptable.

I want to tell hon. Members about one of my constituents. A little child from a Commonwealth nation, whose daddy serves the Queen and this country—and does so exceptionally well—cries because she has not seen her daddy in two years. Her daddy also works in a Chinese restaurant to get extra money to get his savings up to the level to allow him to qualify. On top of that, it costs £10,000 in fees to apply to get his family to join him, which is difficult enough to raise to start with, but the fact that he has to do that through a second job illustrates where we are. That is a wee girl crying for her daddy for two years. He cannot get his family here until he earns the money and saves £10,000 for fees.

There is something drastically wrong with a system that—rightly—allows asylum seekers an opportunity to safely reside here, but takes out of the hands of people who have put their lives on the line the ability to have their families with them here, in this nation. It is wrong. For the benefit of everyone, I emphasise again: it is wrong, and it cannot be accepted.

I do not want to hear that the Ministry of Defence is aware that it is wrong and is thinking about it; I need to hear that the MOD is working with the Home Office to change it. I think that the Minister will tell us that, and I am looking forward to his response.

I stand with the cross-party delegation and demand that the fee for applications is reduced or scrapped for Commonwealth entrants. I am very conscious of how it affects others because others have said what he wanted to say before he got there.

I, too, am, if not a child, then a grandchild, of empire. I had a cousin who commanded the 10th Baluch Regiment in the second world war. In one of the Arakan offensives, he got cut off with his soldiers behind Japanese lines. Japanese propaganda reported that he had committed suicide—cut his throat, as they put it in the English language propaganda they dropped from aeroplanes. He did not; he fought his way out of the jungle and got his troops out. I knew him as an old man, and he told me of the incredible bravery of the Baluchis and about what fantastic soldiers they were. To his grave, he said that there was nothing better.

Although my own father came from the north of Scotland, he also found himself, through a series of events, in India, in 1941. He also spoke of the extraordinary professionalism and valour of Baluchi, Punjabi and Sikh—of all manner of parts of what was then the British Indian Army in the sub-continent. He was proud to have been a member of the 14th Army—the Forgotten Army—commanded by Slim in its latter days. He was in the second wave going through Imphal, and he told me about Imphal and Kohima and what it meant. Kohima is rightly described as the Stalingrad of Britain. We beat the Japanese, but it was done with the fantastic soldiers from the Indian sub-continent and other parts of the world. Although today is the anniversary of VE-day, and Commonwealth troops contributed to the downfall of Hitler and his brutal regime, it is when celebrating the anniversary of VJ-day in a few weeks’ time that we should remember just what their contribution was, because it was absolutely massive.

On a lighter note, one of the abiding things that has stayed with me through my life is that, early on in India, my father decided that the European food in the mess was absolutely disastrous, and that he was going to learn how to cook curry properly. He went through to the kitchens—it was highly disapproved of for a British officer to do that, but he did, because he was a bit...
[Jamie Stone]

eccentric and different—and he learnt to cook curry. Through all of my life, I have eaten an enormous amount of curry cooked by my father. We used to joke in my family that he could probably have curried an old boot and made it quite edible.

I too have been, in my small way, a member of the reserve forces, so I know a little bit about them. It was quite a long time ago, but I was a private soldier in the 2nd Battalion of the 51st Highland Volunteers. When I was a member of another place—I do not mean next door; I mean somewhere in Edinburgh—I was very much involved in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I served for a number of years on the executive committee. I saw first hand just what an important institution the Commonwealth is, as other Members have said. It is a civilising, peace-making, teaching influence throughout the world, and one of the greatest things that we and all Commonwealth countries contribute to the good of the world.

Much has been said today—better than I can say it—about the role of Commonwealth soldiers. Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I saw that with my own eyes when I went with the armed forces parliamentary scheme to Estonia to spend some days with other hon. and right hon. Members and the 1st Battalion of the Yorkshire Regiment. I met soldiers from Commonwealth countries—from west Africa and from across the Atlantic. I remember talking to one young man who was the gunner on a Warrior—the Minister and other Members will know what I am talking about. I said, “That’s a pretty cool job, isn’t it?” He said, “Yes, it is. This is a cool job to have.” I then made a fatal mistake. I said, “I expect when you are in your No. 2 uniform, you are very smart.” This is not very politically correct, but I said, “That may well help you when it comes to talking to the opposite sex.” He reprimanded me and said, “I don’t need my uniform to pull the girls!” I am sorry if that story has shocked people.

The point is that the Commonwealth troops that I and others saw in Estonia were really good soldiers. Yet, if we look at the stats, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East said, it is clear that we are not getting those soldiers beyond non-commissioned rank. Only 2.46% of officers are from a minority ethnic background or Commonwealth countries. We are missing a trick here.

I close with one suggestion. We need to sort this out. We need to get the career progress for those soldiers, sailors and airmen right from the bottom to the top of the service. I have made this point again and again in the House: as and when we have a successful serving person, they should be encouraged when they get leave to go back to their school or their country, wherever that is in the Commonwealth, to say to pupils, “This is the career I am pursing, and it is a good career. Why don’t you think about doing it as well?” We do not do that very much in the UK, and we are missing a trick here.

The Government’s policy of going out to recruit Commonwealth servicemen and women is absolutely a good idea. It has a long history, as I and other Members have mentioned. We have a rich seam that we can mine, but if we do not do it properly, we have to get the message that it is worth while—as other Members have said, “You will be remunerated properly and honoured in this country and in your own land. It is a great service.”
Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) recently campaigned for his constituent, Denis Omondi, a British citizen and a serving soldier in the British Army, who was denied his daughter in Kenya, for whom he had uncontested custody, to come and live with him. Thankfully, after my hon. Friend’s campaign, the Home Office made a U-turn on its decision to keep them apart, but such cases are not unique. We need to deal with such issues and look at them in a more serious manner.

Richard Graham: One of the things that has surprised me most about the letter campaign—the hon. Lady kindly signed the letter—is the number of Fijian servicemen who have logged on to my Facebook page and expressed strong support for the campaign. Pockets of servicemen and women from different countries are much more focused on this issue than many of us in the House realise, so I support what she says.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We could also mention the Hong Kong service personnel caught up in this. They are not able to apply even for British citizenship, despite the service they have given to our nations’ armed forces. There are many examples.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) talked about his personal experience of Commonwealth personnel. I want to add to his story and say that the person who taught me to cook curry properly was a Commonwealth submariner from India, who spent an afternoon showing me how to mix and crush and all sorts. Unfortunately, I do not have much time these days to make a proper curry, but I remember it well.

The Minister for Immigration said last month: “it would be unfair if certain applicants or routes benefited from free applications or reduced fees” at the expense of others. Such inflexibility does not reflect well on the Government. Veterans from the Commonwealth should not be prevented from settling in the UK, or forced into debt by ridiculous fees, which the Government should commit to abolishing. It is not up to them to get veterans into debt and not up to veterans’ charities to help veterans pay the fees, which simply should not exist.

We know that the Home Office is in need of drastic reform. The Minister has mentioned that he does not like talk of the hostile environment, so I will not refer to it directly, but I will say that we have had immigration scandals that have highlighted the deficiencies in our system. Scrapping the income requirements for Commonwealth armed forces personnel is an essential place to start. As I said at the start, it is a no-brainer.

We have a debt of gratitude to the people who have chosen to serve. That, coupled with the positive contribution that Commonwealth veterans will make in our society, means we should ensure that indefinite leave to remain is granted without charge, for both personnel and their families. All of us here this afternoon are keen to hear how the Minister is collaborating with the Home Office to ensure that that takes place. I look forward to hearing his contribution and what positive steps are being taken to sort out this—I will not call it an injustice—serious issue for our Commonwealth personnel.

3.18 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon. Mr Sharma. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing the debate and on his detailed and compassionate opening contribution. I pay tribute to all Members who have spoken for their thoughtful and constructive contributions, and in some cases for sharing very personal stories about the issue. Those include the hon. Members for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), and my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

It is fully acknowledged that throughout the 20th century and through to the present, British armed forces have recruited from Commonwealth nations to support British intervention in major global conflicts, from world war one to the present day. Those personnel continue to provide important and significant support to our armed forces. As we have heard, statistics from the Royal British Legion show that more than 6,000 personnel from foreign and Commonwealth countries currently serve in the UK armed forces. That number is increasing year on year to fill a range of technical and specialist roles. In 2018 the British Army employed approximately 4.5%—5,290—of its personnel from foreign and Commonwealth nations. There are many Commonwealth recruits in the Army, as well as in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Labour Members believe that all armed forces personnel, regardless of their background, should be treated equally, and it is therefore extremely disappointing that Commonwealth soldiers are being treated unfairly by the Government. I shall return to that point.

The Government have done nowhere near enough to tackle the ongoing recruitment crisis, and given their recent decision to recruit more Commonwealth personnel, they must urgently review the barriers to recruitment and retention. Commonwealth personnel are exempt from UK immigration controls throughout their service, but once they are discharged that exemption is removed. Former personnel who wish to stay in the UK indefinitely, whether with their family or alone, must apply for indefinite leave to remain. As the Minister rightly pointed out, in alignment with civilian applicants for indefinite leave to remain, veterans are subject to a number of requirements, including four years’ qualifying residency in the UK, which is obtainable via four years’ service in the armed forces, and a non-refundable fee of £2,389.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East and others have outlined, there are difficulties with the immigration rules because a foreign worker must earn £18,600 to apply to bring their spouse to the UK. The minimum income requirement to bring over one child is £22,400, with additional costs for each child thereafter. A soldier’s basic pay after training starts at £18,600 a year, but in many circumstances that income is unachievable, as the majority of Commonwealth troops in our armed forces are in the lower ranks. As my hon. Friend outlined, the Army Families Federation believes that around 500 troops have been affected by those circumstances, and that Commonwealth soldiers are not fully aware of such issues when they join the UK armed forces. The Government need to consider that issue sympathetically, to show our country’s gratitude to those Commonwealth personnel who have served.
A recent Defence Committee report recognised that the vast majority of veterans leave the services with no ill effects. It also noted, however, that although the Government have made improvements to the care available to personnel leaving the armed forces, “some serving personnel veterans and their families who need mental health care are still being completely failed by the system”.

One important welfare issue that particularly affects foreign and Commonwealth personnel is that of non-freezing cold injuries. Ministry of Defence guidance warns that “African-Caribbeans may be at greater risk than Caucasians” of non-freezing cold injuries, and states that commanders should have a heightened awareness of the higher risk. Despite that guidance, many Commonwealth soldiers continue to feel let down. The Government are fully aware that African-Caribbean soldiers are more susceptible to such injuries, but they do not always provide them with a better kit or remove those susceptible from exercise when they complain of cold symptoms, and neither do they nor undertake hand and foot inspections at the time or when weather conditions are bad. Injured soldiers are often discharged, and in many cases they struggle to retrain for jobs that they can manage with permanent cold sensitisation.

In 2015-16 the Government paid out £1.49 million to servicemen suffering from that condition under the armed forces compensation scheme, which was a 20% rise on the previous year. Since 2006, 1,235 armed forces personnel have received compensation from the Government for such injuries. Last year saw a 16.7% rise in the total number of service personnel awarded compensation by the Government, and over the past 10 years claims have risen by a staggering 1,650%—evidence of the scale of the problem and the need for something to be done.

Labours Members are also concerned about the disparity in war gratuity payments given to black soldiers of the East Africa Force, which was formed in 1940, and their white counterparts. There are reports that white soldiers were paid up to three times more than their black counterparts. The shadow Secretaries of State for Defence, for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and for International Development have written to the Government calling for an investigation into the issue, an apology for those affected and—for the veterans to be paid what they are entitled to before it is too late.

All Members will recognise the immense debt that we owe to all personnel, veterans and their families, and the need to ensure that they have the best possible support. The Government must do more to protect all soldiers, but they should pay particular attention to Commonwealth soldiers who suffer from the issues I have raised this afternoon. A number of important and legitimate concerns and questions have been raised today, and I hope that the Minister will provide clarity and assurances on those, and show that the Government are not passing the buck for historical grievances that affect Commonwealth soldiers. The small number of surviving veterans who were affected by racially based disparities in the payments given to them in the second world war deserve an apology at the very least, as well as a thorough investigation into and acknowledgement of their unfair treatment.

3.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure and honour to respond to this important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing it. I also thank him for his service. In this country we do not pay tribute often enough to those who put on the uniform and serve their country—perhaps we are shy compared with the Americans—so I am grateful for that. The hon. Gentleman brings a level of expertise and understanding to this debate, which is very welcome.

As the Prime Minister did today during Prime Minister’s questions, I wish to pay tribute to Guardsman Mathew Talbot, who was sadly killed on duty in the Liwonde national park in Malawi, where he had an important role in the counter-poaching efforts in which we are involved. His work was a reflection of the symbiotic relationship that we have with so many Commonwealth countries with which we work, not just on security aspects but on the other detailed challenges that we face, including poaching. This is a very sad moment, and our thoughts and prayers are very much with Mathew’s friends and family. It is a reflection of the bond that we have with nations of the Commonwealth when dealing with modern-day problems.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East spoke of the history of the Commonwealth countries, and of the bonds that go back to before the East India Company and have matured into something very important that goes beyond trade; it is the strength of trust that we have. It is a relationship that we value very much, to the point that we invite them to work with us—to be in the trenches, on the factory floors and in the diplomatic corridors—and serve together for the greater good, and to stand up to ill across the world.

I look back on my own service. The first sergeant who I came across in the Royal Green Jackets, Sergeant Morrell, was a big, burly character from Fiji. He could do things with a Northern Ireland glove that kept discipline in line in our platoon. It would probably not be allowed nowadays, but it was nevertheless a fantastic introduction to the contribution that the Commonwealth made. Another person in my platoon was from St. Lucia. He was a wonderful character of the same size as Dwayne Johnson, also known as The Rock, who is a big, burly actor in all the movies at the moment. My colleague was his own deterrent: whenever he stood behind me when I had a disagreement, things were somehow resolved very quickly.
It is important that we begin this debate by paying tribute and giving thanks to our Commonwealth friends for what they bring to this country, which is all the more reason why we need to get this particular issue absolutely right. I will answer some of the general questions that were asked and then dive into the detailed matter, if I may.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East touched on the mental aspect, which is something that is quite important to me. I hope he acknowledges the advancement that we have made on stoicism and the difficulties we have in the armed forces environment of talking about mental health. Our new strategy is about recognising that it is all right to put one’s hand up and say there might be something wrong with one’s mind, as one does if there is something wrong physically; greater prevention in the resilience that we build up in preparing people for the battlefields and theatres of operations in which they might be involved; and better detection, so that we can treat people and get them back to the frontline without their fearing that putting their hand up might affect their career prospects. Although the hon. Gentleman raises this matter, I hope that we have made progress. More work needs to be done, and we look forward to sharing some of the work we have done with the arrival of Mental Health Awareness Week next week.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke of friends and family, which perhaps goes to the heart of this matter. Individuals from the Commonwealth come here with the anticipation that perhaps one day they might wish to bring their families. Questions then arise, because financial challenges are suddenly imposed. I know that one of the reasons people choose to depart the armed forces is the eventual pressures on the family unit, including children at school and spouses. We are working to ensure that the welfare support we provide to people in uniform extends to the wider family support unit, which is so critical.

Hon. Members touched on matters that are not the purview of the Ministry of Defence, which I think is recognised—for example, the Home Office has responded to Windrush. I hope he recognises that I cannot respond to such questions. I will do my best to answer some of them in the time we have. If I cannot, I commit to writing to hon. Members with the details, should that be helpful.

I do not understand why my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) is still on the Back Benches, because the knowledge that he brings to debates is phenomenal, which I hope is recognised. He spoke about his background in Kenya, and I know he also spent a bit of time in the far east—he is a real internationalist. Every time he adds value to these debates, people listen. He made the most important point: this is not just about our armed forces, but applies to anybody who wants to come and work in our NHS or for the police. The very same challenges exist in those arenas. We have to recognise that other Departments will be queuing up to say, “I’ll have some of that too, please, if you don’t mind.” That is the wider context of this debate, so I was very pleased that he raised that point.

Alex Chalk: The Minister is giving a powerful response, as I would expect. He is right to say that there is a risk of a floodgates argument. Does he agree that people who put their lives on the line in the service of this country are in a special category, which ought to be reflected in the way their visa applications are dealt with?

Mr Ellwood: I do not want to kill my own argument, so of course I am going to say that my hon. Friend makes a powerful point. We need to recognise that people joining our police forces or fire services would claim something similar. We need to find a solution that is amenable to all, but which also recognises—this issue was raised earlier—the challenges for recruitment and retention. I will not deny those. At the moment, we are doing better at recruitment, but not so well at retention, which is partly to do with improving the actual contract that we have with people to ensure that we retain them for as long as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester also mentioned the campaign that the Royal British Legion has done, and it was a pleasure to meet Charles Byrne yesterday to discuss these and other issues. I am very grateful for the work the RBL is doing to highlight this issue.

Jamie Stone: Can I press the Minister on that point? In my own contribution—I did not put it quite as eloquently as I should have done—I said that if somebody at the bottom could see a career path that would take them up, it might improve the chances of retention.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will come on to address such issues. He allows me to jump ahead and thank him for his contribution and the valuable point that he makes. People who arrive here tend to be singles—individuals on their own. They have signed up, but their circumstances might change. What happens then? It is a communication issue as well. We need to make sure that those who are embarking on this journey and signing up to join our armed forces are fully aware of what is happening. We have found out, particularly from the families’ federations, that they arrive here unaware of the financial consequences, which is the first step we are trying to resolve.

My good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), mentioned the role of the Gurkhas. They are not part of the Commonwealth, but we have a unique relationship that has developed over time. Through various campaigns, they have gained parity with our armed forces, which is very important indeed. He also mentioned that everybody who serves in Her Majesty’s armed forces deserves the gratitude of the nation, and I could not agree more.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) spoke of the importance of the families’ federations. I meet with them on a regular basis and will be seeing them tomorrow. I think we are meeting some in the near future to talk about aspects of the charities’ work. The three families’ federations give some of the most important input I receive—a reality check on what life is like in our armed forces. It is critical that we keep that communication going.

Richard Graham: In terms of the nation at large understanding the scale of the Commonwealth contribution to our armed forces, would the Ministry of Defence consider creating a digital database so people of the some 4,700 Commonwealth servicemen and women, and the different armed forces or units they are in, to give an example of the scale of what I think is roughly 5% of the Army alone?
Mr Ellwood: That would certainly be an interesting reflection of the importance of the contribution they make. I think the current number stands at about 4,500. There are also 3,000 Gurkhas—as I indicated earlier, they are an incredibly formidable and extremely professional force, and I had the privilege to serve with many of them.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West spoke of the Capita contract. We have debated this many times, and it is a concern of ours as well. I am genuinely concerned, because I fear that there is a gulf between our capability and the threats we face, which needs to be recognised if it is to be filled. We need to ensure that we retain and recruit, and that we procure the necessary equipment, in order to close the gap. Given that we have a spending review coming up, that is exactly what the new Defence Secretary is focusing on. I hope hon. Members will be supportive of an increased defence budget.

I spoke of our historic relationship from a military service perspective. At Sandhurst, Lympstone, Dartmouth or the staff college at Shrivenham, one can see myriad representatives from the full spectrum of Commonwealth countries. Those people are not just in our armed forces, but also train officers, for example, and work alongside their British comrades, which is exactly as it should be. British personnel also go to staff colleges in other countries around the world. At any one time, a number of British officers are at the staff college in India, for example. That is an important advancement of our relationship.

Another reflection of our gratitude is the number of Victoria Crosses awarded over the years. Some 280 Victoria Crosses have been awarded to people from 13 different Commonwealth countries, including William Hall from Canada in 1857, for his contribution in India, and more recently, Johnson Beharry, who was in Al-Amarah in Iraq in 2004. That shows that once they are in uniform and working alongside us, they meet the same standards, values, professionalism and bravery that we expect from our own troops.

The terms and conditions for Commonwealth soldiers, sailors and air personnel are exactly the same as for their British counterparts, as are their pay, accommodation and service eligibility criteria. They fulfil a wide range of roles, whether technical or from an infantry perspective, which is why it is so important, in this day and age, to recognise that and give thanks to our Commonwealth citizens.

Commonwealth citizens with five years of residency are eligible to join the armed forces—between 2013 and 2015, 650 joined. Last November, the Government announced plans to significantly expand the number of Commonwealth personnel to 1,350, which reflects the challenge of recruiting in the UK. That required the removal of the five-year UK residency criterion for Commonwealth participants.

Richard Graham: The Minister makes a good point about those numbers. I understand that every year, roughly 400 Commonwealth servicemen and women apply for indefinite leave to remain. If the cost for a family of four is roughly £10,000, the total cost would be around half a million pounds. Although that is a lot of money for any individual, it is a relatively small figure in the overall scheme of Government spending, so I hope that the Minister agrees that whatever judgment the Home Office reaches, it will not be because of financial pressure.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, with which I was going to conclude. We are not talking about huge sums of money to rectify the problem—it will not completely break the bank, but it will require answers. At the moment, the ball is in the court of the Home Office, which is looking at the issue, but he suggests exactly how we would like it to go.

The immigration status has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members. Non-UK personnel are granted an exemption from immigration control by the Home Office once they have joined, and can come and go from the UK without restriction for the purposes of their duty. The exemption is valid for the entirety of their regular service. Commonwealth personnel can apply to naturalise, using their time in the UK and while serving overseas towards the five-year UK residency criterion. That is not offered to other groups living and working in the UK, so it distinguishes us from police and NHS recruitment. Non-naturalised personnel can apply for indefinite leave to remain if they have completed a minimum of four years’ service upon discharge. Applications can be made up to 10 weeks before discharge, so indefinite leave to remain can normally be granted quickly following the last day of service.

The minimum income requirement was also raised by a number of hon. Members. The Home Office introduced new family migration rules, including a minimum income threshold—now known as the minimum income requirement—that individuals need to meet to sponsor visas for non-EU dependants to enter the UK. The minimum income requirement is £18,600 for a spouse or civil partner. That rises to £22,400 for a spouse or civil partner plus a child, and further £2,400 is required for each individual child beyond that. The minimum income requirement is designed to ensure that sponsors can support their dependants financially, so that they do not become a burden on the UK taxpayer. The requirement has been tested and upheld by the Supreme Court.

The starting salary after training for regular soldiers is £18,850, which is above the minimum income requirement. Any individual soldier who comes here and passes their basic training is not affected by the minimum income requirement, because they earn the right amount of money. The problem is if they want to bring their other half or any children—that is the dilemma we face. For lower-ranked soldiers, sailors and air personnel, it can take up to four years for an individual salary to meet the minimum income requirement to bring a child to the UK. I agree with hon. Members that that is too long and needs to be addressed.

The immigration issues that impact on our personnel and their families have been raised as a key priority under the armed forces covenant, which we should recognise. Progress is being monitored through meetings, such as those of the Covenant Reference Group and the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board. We have raised the matter at every necessary level and are in discussions with the Home Office to explore whether armed forces personnel can be exempted from minimum income requirements to allow non-UK and non-EU citizens to bring family members to the UK, and whether the costs of visas during service and applying for settlement after service can be waived.

I cannot make it clearer than that. That is what I want to achieve and what we need to do if we are to meet our moral obligation and sense of gratitude to
those who serve alongside us in peace and in war, to keep our country and their countries safe, and to keep our adversaries at bay. I will do my best to review what hon. Members have said and will write to them. I hope I have been clear about where the MOD and I sit on this issue. We will work with the Home Office to conclude the matter in a positive manner.

3.48 pm

Mr Sweeney: I congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members on the excellent, insightful and, in some cases, very moving contributions they have made about their own experiences. The key is recognition of the service of Commonwealth soldiers, Gurkhas and others, who serve this country with great gallantry and bravery. The notion that their service or welfare could be undermined by the restrictions and impositions of the Home Office must be addressed with the greatest urgency. It is important that this House has recognised those concerns, and I welcome the spirit of the Minister’s approach to the debate as well as his sentiments.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) noted the potential knock-on effects on other Government Departments—it relates to the police and the national health service in particular—and how special exemptions for the armed forces might bleed over into challenges. I strongly echo his sentiment: the armed forces are a special case and, frankly, we as a nation should have the common sense to recognise the unique nature of their contribution and the gallant nature of their service, which is quite unique, compared even with the police. We ought to introduce special exemptions as a matter of urgency.

The Minister said that he is in discussions with the Home Office about the income thresholds. That is a welcome measure—to everyone—but a wider concern is the continuing cost of visas. It seems unacceptable to me that a veteran bringing, say, three dependants into the UK can be subject to a cost of £10,000. That seems thoroughly unreasonable. We would welcome the Minister considering the recommendation to amend the immigration and nationality fees regulations as a short-term measure to exclude recent members of the armed forces and their dependants from such costs. We are talking about some 500 people a year, which would not be a massive or onerous cost.

The Royal British Legion has stated that it spends thousands and thousands of pounds, from its own money, supporting veterans with those costs, and I am sure that many of those who donate to the RBL will be frustrated to learn that the money they donate goes back to the Home Office in fees—not a particularly useful way to spend their funds. To dispense with those fees altogether would be better and more efficient. I hope that is another aspect of the Minister’s discussions with the Home Office of a more sensible approach.

I welcome the sentiments expressed today, and there has been great consensus in the Chamber about how we need to proceed. I look forward to following developments closely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered fair treatment for Commonwealth personnel in the armed forces.

---

3.53 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of High Speed Two on the villages of Hollins Green, Culcheth and Croft.

It is a great pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to have been granted this debate on the impact of the proposed High Speed 2 line on villages in my constituency. For the record, although I live in the village of Culcheth, our home is not one of those affected by the line. Nevertheless, many of us have believed for some time that what we call “the spur”—the Hoo Green to Bamfurlong section of the line—simply does not stack up economically, or in any other terms, and that the decision to join the main line north of Warrington, rather than north of Crewe, is flawed.

I have previously questioned the costings for that part of the line. I do not propose to go through all that again, but suffice it to say that if HS2 is seriously arguing that this part of the line will cost only 28.6% of the costs elsewhere, when a viaduct has to be built over the Manchester ship canal and the M62 and the East Lancashire Road have to be crossed, it is highly unlikely to be correct. In fact, many of us have believed for some time that the real justification for the spur was to avoid the constituency of a certain former Chancellor of the Exchequer, of this parish. Now, with the decision to make Crewe a main transport hub and to abandon plans for any depot at Golborne, it makes even less sense than it did.

Even so, neither HS2 nor the Government have taken full account of the concerns of people who live in the villages. One bit of the line was tweaked following representations from the owner of the Taylor business park just outside Culcheth. That mitigated some of the impact on some houses in Culcheth but increased the problems in Croft. However, the decision allowed the business park to be sold for an undisclosed sum, reported by local newspapers to be more than £19 million—without any gain, I suspect, to the British taxpayer, since the last time I looked most of the shares in the business park were held by a company registered in Belize. We often ponder why notice was taken of one person, and not of the representations of the rest of the community.

That part of the line, however, has serious implications for all three villages. That is what I will concentrate on today. For example, Wigshaw Lane is proposed for permanent closure. It is the route that leads from Culcheth to Croft, going on towards the centre of Warrington. Traffic will therefore be forced on to the other route towards town, which is the A574, despite the fact that that road is already at a standstill at peak times. An accident on the motorway or the East Lancashire Road can gridlock traffic all around the village. It is simply not sustainable to force more traffic on to an already congested road which is used as a cut-through by HGVs.

Importantal, Wigshaw Lane is also the direct link between Culcheth and Croft, and closing it will have a serious impact on people’s ability to access services in
Culcheth village. For example, many people in Croft come into Culcheth to shop and to use the doctors’ surgeries there. Culcheth High School is the nearest high school to Croft and is attended by many of the young people from that village. They will be forced on to a much more unsafe route to school, and the road closure will have a particularly adverse impact on elderly and disabled people who come to shop in Culcheth.

There will of course also be problems for people who want to move the other way, from Culcheth to Croft and towards town. For example, the hospital is in the centre of town, and young people who want to access post-16 educational provision, whether at Warrington and Vale Royal College or Priestley College, need to go into the town centre. How people will get to early appointments in Warrington, or young people to classes, when the road is congested and often at a standstill is something that no one appears to have considered properly.

In fact, young people will be disproportionately affected by the closure because they move between the villages of Croft and Culcheth for sport and recreation, as well as education. Local air cadets, for example, are based in Croft. People go there from Culcheth and all around the town. The cadets are well respected—one member of my staff learned to fly with them—but the direct route there will be closed. Similarly, for young people who want to come from Croft to Culcheth to access after-school activities and sports facilities, there will be no direct route.

If that were not enough, another proposal is that the area known as the Oaks—which is on the alternative route, the A574—will lose more than 20% of its area. Culcheth Athletic junior football club has 23 teams that play there. The idea put forward by HS2, that they can all move to Shaw Street recreation ground in Culcheth, or the Culcheth sports and social club, which we call the Daten, is nonsense: four out of six pitches and the parking facilities are to be lost. It is interesting that the Government want people to be more active and for young people to take part in more sport and in the cadet forces, yet they are set on making it more difficult for them to do so in the area.

Another part of the community that will suffer a serious impact is the Catholic population. St Lewis Primary School is in Croft, as is St Lewis parish church. When the direct route is closed, young children will no longer have an even moderately safe route to school; they will be forced on to the congested A574. Older people and others who want to go to mass will be seriously inconvenienced. That is direct discrimination against the Catholic community, which goes against HS2’s declared policies.

If that were not enough, there is a proposal to put a construction depot on the A574, close to Newchurch Primary School and the residential houses that abut that road. That will increase not only traffic—yet again on a road that is already congested—but air and noise pollution for the primary school and the people who live in that area. Anyone who knows the villages would say that the proposal simply is not feasible.

As far as Hollins Green is concerned, there is a proposal to build a viaduct over the Manchester ship canal, despite the fact that on the nearby M6 the Thelwall viaduct often has speed restrictions because of high winds. It would be interesting to know how HS2 thinks that is feasible. Previous plans for a motorway in the area were rejected by the then Secretary of State on grounds that remain relevant to HS2: namely, that it would have an unacceptable environmental impact, and would cause a loss of green belt and a harmful effect on village life. That viaduct and its associated embankment will tower over the area. It will cut through a historic parish and it will destroy a network of footpaths between Hollins Green and Glazebrook.

As well as the environmental impact, there will be an economic impact on the villages. It might help, the Minister if I explain that Culcheth is the centre village for Croft and Glazebury and, in some sense, for Glazebrook too. Lots of people from outside those areas come to the village because they are attracted by its mix of local shops and nice restaurants and pubs. When Wigshaw Lane had to be closed a few years ago for bridge repairs, there was a serious impact on local businesses, which lost a lot of trade. Culcheth also has a thriving night-time economy—because of the restaurants and so on. People come to the village from quite far away. That trade will be reduced if one of the main routes out is closed.

The new route will go straight through the Partridge Lakes fishery—a thriving family business built up over many years, which has also planted thousands of trees. Other businesses are situated there, too. For instance, there is a store that sells prom dresses—I think that is a thing now, although when I was growing up we just went to the pub when we left school. People come from all around to get their dresses there. There is a yoga studio and there is the Black Sheep Wools craft centre. The key thing to remember if those businesses go to the wall is that they encourage people to go to Culcheth village and spend money in the shops and restaurants. It would be a double whammy.

In Hollins Green, the Black Sheep pub will have the route going straight through its car park. People go to that pub from outside the village, and it holds a thriving farmer’s market that brings people into the village. We are constantly told that HS2 is beneficial to the economy. I do not think it is beneficial to the economy of these villages. Although I keep asking questions about the economic impact and the assessment that has been made of it, I do not get very satisfactory answers. The cost-benefit ratio of the line is estimated at between 0.5 and 0.8, but with the effect on those businesses, many of which will experience a serious loss of trade and some of which may go to the wall, that analysis changes. I hope the Minister will look at that very seriously.

There will be an impact on people’s health. The loss of the footpaths in Hollins Green, the loss of access to the linear park, which is used by walkers and horse riders, and the loss of the fishery where people are welcome to walk around, look at the wildlife and have a coffee, will have a serious impact on people’s access to green space. HS2 accepts that most anglers tend to be older men and a high proportion are disabled, although the fishery has done sterling work with young offenders to try to get them interested in the sport. We know that being out in the open air is beneficial not only to our physical health but to our mental health. Many of those benefits will be lost in those villages. We will pay the price in worse health, but in the end the country will pay the price in increased costs to the NHS.
It cannot be right that HS2 can come up with plans that anyone who knows anything about these villages thinks are unworkable. They take no account of the traffic situation, the economy of the villages and people’s health. They are just not feasible. In addition, many of them ignore HS2’s own stated equalities policies, because they have a disproportionate impact on young people, older and disabled people, and the Catholic community.

There is a way out of this situation. As the costs escalate, Ministers need to look at the cost of this part of the line. In fact, in previous debates I have undertaken, Ministers did agree that the costs needed to be looked at. The original cost of the spur was estimated at £800 million, whereas joining the main line north of Crewe was estimated at £750 million. The cost of the spur has risen to £1 billion. The original justification for not joining the main line north of Crewe was that a lot of work would need to be done to make Crewe station viable. Since the Higgins report, it has been decided that Crewe will be a main transport hub, so that work will have to be done anyway.

The other justification for the route was having a depot at Golborne, so that trains could turn around and come out of that depot. There is no longer going to be a depot there. I urge the Minister to look seriously at that. It has been said often that HS2 is of great benefit to big cities but not much benefit to towns. There is something in that. By looking again at the possibility of running trains out of Crewe to Chester, north Wales, Liverpool and up through Warrington, many towns could benefit much more, and the impact on villages could be avoided. If the Minister cannot do that, I strongly urge her to look at HS2’s plans for building the line and the impact on those villages. I sincerely believe that they will be disastrous for village life and the whole thing needs to be considered again.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.23 pm. Before calling the Minister to speak, I congratulate the hon. Lady on giving a detailed and knowledgeable speech for just under 15 minutes without referring to any notes whatsoever. I call the Minister.

4.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on securing this important debate on the effect of High Speed 2 on the villages of Hollins Green, Culcheth and Croft. She gave us a lovely picture of her constituency.

I sympathise with the concerns the hon. Lady has raised with me, my Department and previous Ministers, and with HS2 Ltd itself. I shall provide an overview of why the project is important and then move on to the questions she asked. If I fail to respond to them all, I hope she will allow me to correspond with her in writing to ensure that everything is down on paper. I do not doubt for a moment that she will continue to champion action on behalf of her constituency.

HS2 is a critical project for our country. It will be the backbone of our national rail network. It will really help to rebalance our economy, create opportunities for regeneration and lessen the north-south divide. The strategic case for HS2 is that it will increase capacity on our overcrowded rail network and improve journeys into and between the major towns and cities of the midlands and the north. It will connect eight of our 10 biggest cities, and it will more than double the number of seats from Euston in peak hours, carrying more than 300,000 people every day.

I know the hon. Lady raised concerns on behalf of her constituents, but we are already starting to see the benefits of HS2. More than 7,000 people are working on the line and more than 2,000 businesses are working to deliver the new railway. Opportunities for jobs and apprenticeships are being created across the country; I am pleased to say that more than 250 new apprenticeships have been created so far. The project is critical. It will connect half of our country’s population. Even though the hon. Lady’s constituents may be asking, “What’s in it for me?”, they are among that half of the population that the project will impact by helping to rebalance the economy.

HS2 is an essential component in the delivery of the Government’s and Transport for the North’s plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail. For example, the current designs for NPR use HS2 infrastructure into Manchester and Leeds. If we did not build HS2 phase 2b, we would need to send NPR back to the drawing board. The two projects are complementary and will work in tandem to transform connectivity across the north, bringing towns and cities together. If the hon. Lady does not want to take my word for it, I have a recent article by Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, and Steve Rotheram, the Mayor of the Liverpool city region, in which they talk about the benefits that I hope she will—

Helen Jones rose—

Ms Ghani: Let me just go through the quote. I have many more—too many for this debate—but this one is important, because it mentions the benefits in the north. Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram wrote:

“The economic output of Greater Manchester could double to around £132bn by 2050” because of HS2,

“contributing at least 40,000 new jobs. Liverpool city region forecasts £15bn of economic growth and 24,000 new jobs.”

You will be surprised to learn, Mr Hollobone, that we often read criticism of HS2. It tends to come from the press, which tends to be based down here. Importantly, in their article, those leaders of the north wrote:

“We don’t need London commentators telling northern leaders what we need.”

It is important to reflect what is wanted and needed beyond London and the south-east.

Helen Jones: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; she is very kind. However, I think she is making my point about HS2 benefiting big cities rather than towns. Warrington is in neither Greater Manchester nor Merseyside—it is in Cheshire—and it will not have a station on the line. As my constituents have argued, areas that are getting a station might be able to weigh the benefits against the costs, but for areas that are not getting a station and already have an hourly service to London, as we do, the situation is much more difficult.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady raises some important points. I note that she does not actually criticise HS2 but expresses a desire for a station. Unfortunately, if I provided a station to everyone who wanted one, the project would not be going anywhere very fast anytime soon. There are already 2,000 businesses and 7,000 people
involved in the project, and at its peak there will be 30,000 people building this railway, so I do not doubt for a moment that every part of the country will be touched in a positive way, whether it is by the economic opportunities or the jobs that HS2 provides.

Let me turn to the questions the hon. Lady raised. She made a robust argument about the Golborne link. The Government will continue to invest in upgrades to the conventional rail network, including the west coast main line, in addition to their proposals for the development and delivery of HS2. However, only HS2 will be sufficient to meet the long-term growth in demand that is forecast on the existing network. HS2 is the right intervention to address the capacity constraints on the west coast and east coast main lines. The Government have already considered alternative schemes to HS2, including upgrading the existing railway, but no other option can deliver the same scale of benefits as HS2 phase 2b.

The Golborne link is the most effective way to deliver the much-needed capacity on the west coast main line. It has two key purposes: it avoids a constrained section of the west coast main line, improving capacity and reliability on that line, and it delivers faster journey times for destinations north of the connection, such as Wigan, Preston, Lancaster, Cumbria and Scotland. The hon. Lady mentioned costs and benefits. Proposed alternatives to the Golborne link would reduce the benefits of HS2 without necessarily saving money. Early analysis shows that delivering the same benefits, such as the published journey times to the north and Scotland, without the Golborne link may add an extra £0.8 billion to the cost of HS2.

Let me move on to some further points the hon. Lady raised about HS2 and Warrington. HS2’s arrival is becoming integral to local plans in Warrington and the surrounding area. Warrington stands to benefit from HS2 services, which will cut journey times between Warrington and London to just over an hour, supporting enhanced growth in and around the town. HS2 is already driving employment opportunities, with approximately 80 businesses in the north-west now working on the early stages of the project. Decisions about service patterns will be taken in the future, taking into account factors such as demand and local considerations. The HS2 indicative train service specification shows Warrington Bank Quay being served by one HS2 train per hour in phase 1, which it will continue to receive when phase 2b opens.

I turn now to some of the important local points that the hon. Lady raised. She made an excellent point about the viaduct versus the tunnel. That issue has been raised by many local stakeholders. Boring under the canal would require a particularly large land take either side of the canal to support tunnelling to the depth required. That means that much more land would be required in the area by a tunnel than by the proposed viaduct. That would have an impact on land and property in the area. The soil conditions in the area would also make tunnel construction difficult; the area around the tunnel is peat, so the tunnel would have to be very deep and constantly drained.

The hon. Lady raised an important point about the depot no longer being situated at Golborne. The decision to relocate the depot to just north of Crewe was made in response to consultation feedback—particularly from local stakeholders—about open spaces and public amenities. The route through this area is still the Secretary of State’s preferred route and is not dependent on the depot being located at Golborne; that is a completely separate issue.

The hon. Lady raised an important point about the environment and the mental and physical health of her constituents. HS2 Ltd has a target to ensure that there is no net loss of biodiversity. Substantial funds are in place in the earlier phases to ensure that we are greening as we go along. HS2 launched a green corridor along phase 1 of the route, which includes 3,340 hectares of wildlife habitat, a 33% increase on existing habitat. HS2 is also committed to planting 7 million trees and shrubs along the line.

The hon. Lady mentioned pitches. HS2 Ltd is aware of the reduction in available pitches and is exploring options to re-provide those. I was moved by the points she raised, so I will keep a close eye on that and do my best to ensure that we get a positive outcome. Otherwise,
I am more than happy to meet her to ensure that her points are, at the very least, heard and responded to by HS2 Ltd.

As I said earlier, this project is crucial for our country, especially in smashing the north-south divide. I appreciate that that will not provide succour for the hon. Lady’s constituents when she returns home this weekend. The Government are already spending more than £48 billion on our existing rail network, but that is not enough. We need to build extra capacity. HS2 is not just about passengers: it is about freight, taking cars off the road and encouraging people to use the railway instead of taking flights.

I am loth to read out another quote, because the hon. Lady will say, “It’s not close to home for me,” but let me reference Judith Blake, the leader of Leeds City Council, because it is appropriate.

Helen Jones: That’s definitely not close.

Ms Ghani: It is not about being close; it is about the importance of the project for our whole country and for the north in particular. Judith Blake said HS2 is “the opportunity to transform the prospects for the north—perhaps a once in 200-year opportunity.”

Politicians are often criticised for not thinking long term, planning for infrastructure on a large enough scale or understanding what our country needs going forward. HS2 addresses that. It is a large project, I understand the hon. Lady’s concerns, but HS2 Ltd is tasked to ensure that it mitigates its impact on the environment and communities.

I welcome the opportunity the debate has provided once again to reflect on how important HS2 is. We must remember that it has cross-party support: when the Bill for phase 2a went through Parliament, only 12 MPs opposed it. It was in all three main political parties’ manifestos. It is right that we continue to focus on delivering it, and it is also right that HS2 Ltd works appropriately, with humility and sympathy, with the communities it will be building the line through.

Question put and agreed to.

4.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

West Papua: Human Rights

4.30 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered human rights in West Papua.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am delighted to have been granted this extremely important debate about human rights in West Papua. As I understand it, this is the first ever debate in the House of Commons on this topic. I am pleased to welcome colleagues from across the House who have come to support the debate, and I am grateful to them.

There have been a couple of brief debates in the other place over the years, but this is the first time that we, as elected representatives, have debated West Papua, despite having held some 3,455 debates in the last 50 years on issues great and small, of national and local significance. That is illustrative of the lack of attention this issue has received, when it ought to have had attention both at home and from the international community. I hope that today, in our small way, we can start to shine a light on the West Papuan cause and to give a voice to the people of West Papua.

I referenced the last 50 years, and there is a significance to that, as 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the so-called Act of Free Choice. That Act is a defining moment in the West Papuan story and forms the context within which the current situation in West Papua must be viewed. I will set out some of that context and give a brief history of West Papua, before discussing the current situation. I will conclude with two key actions I suggest the UK Government consider taking to help improve the human rights situation in West Papua.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way before he starts on his historical exposé. I want to set the current situation in context, as he is coming on to describe it. Is he aware of two human rights situations? The first was illustrated in a video that went viral, which showed a West Papuan freedom fighter being tortured with a snake by the Indonesian army. Is he also aware that, as a result of Indonesian activities in Nduga, 30,000 refugees have been created in just that area?

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am aware of both the fact and the incident; they illustrate, in microcosm, the importance of this debate and are vivid examples of what is happening this very day in West Papua.

West Papua is the western half of New Guinea, which is the second largest island on earth and one of many thousands of south Pacific islands that are collectively known as Melanesia. Papuan people have inhabited the West Papua region for over 40,000 years. It was slowly drawn into the Dutch sphere of influence, and by the end of the 19th century the Dutch had established permanent administrative centres in the region as part of the Dutch East Indies.

When Indonesian nationalists declared independence from the Dutch empire in 1945, they included West Papua in the list of territories that would form the newly born country. That declaration sparked a four-year-long war between the Indonesians and the Dutch, which ended in 1949, when Indonesia was granted international recognition as an independent state at The
Hague roundtable conference. However, this only heightened the divisions that existed on the status of the West Papua region. Indonesia argued that the region should be included in its new independent state, but the Dutch refused to cede the territory. At this point, I ought to mention that the West Papua region is home to the largest gold mine and the second largest copper mine in the world.

No compromise was found in the years that followed Indonesian independence, leading to a further fraying of tensions between Indonesia and the Netherlands. That led to Indonesia building up its military capacity, largely from weapons acquired from the Soviet Union. In the conflict that ensued, the United States, although originally supportive of the Dutch cause, eventually changed its position to ensure that Indonesia would not be driven towards the Soviet Union, in the context of the cold war.

Talks between Indonesia and the Netherlands followed in 1962, with the UN acting as the official mediating power. This resulted in the signing of the New York agreement, according to which the administration of West Papua would be assigned to the United Nations for a minimum of seven months, before being passed to Indonesia. Crucially, article 18 of that agreement stipulated:

“Indonesia will make arrangements, with the assistance and participation of the United Nations Representative and his staff, to give the people of the territory the opportunity to exercise fully the rights, including the rights of free speech, free movement and of assembly, of the inhabitants of the area,”

that guarantee was not fulfilled, because Papuan political parties were banned at the time of the Act of Free Choice.

A one person, one vote system, which is international practice, was not granted. Instead 1,025 representatives were selected by the Indonesian military to vote on behalf of the Papuan people. The representatives voted unanimously in favour of Papua becoming part of Indonesia. However, numerous reports from foreign observers and Papuans suggest that it was not a free consultation. It is claimed that those who were selected for the vote were blackmailed into voting against independence by means of threats of violence against their person and their families. Representatives were taken away from their families and communities for several weeks before the consultation.

Diplomatic cables from the US ambassador to Indonesia reported at the time that the Act of Free Choice in West Papua “is unfolding like a Greek tragedy, the conclusion preordained.”

The ambassador went on to say that the Indonesians “cannot and will not permit any resolution other than continued inclusion” of West Papua

“In Indonesia, Dissident activity is likely to increase as the climax is reached but the Indonesian armed forces will be able to contain it and, if necessary, suppress it.”

The ambassador continued by saying that the Indonesian armed forces had “no intention of allowing” West Papuan choice

“other than incorporation into Indonesia. Separation is unthinkable.”

British diplomats in the region took similar views and drew similar conclusions at the time.

In a House of Lords debate in 2004, the then Foreign Office Minister, Baroness Symons, made this admission in responding to the then Bishop of Oxford:

“He is right to say that there were 1,000 handpicked representatives and that they were largely coerced into declaring for inclusion in Indonesia.”

I would be interested to hear in due course from the Minister whether that is still the position of the UK Government, although I see no reason for it to have changed at this stage.

After making that admission, Baroness Symons went on to say that these things had occurred many decades ago and that, rather than dwelling on the past, it was important to look to the future and improve matters in the here and now. While I have some sympathy with that sentiment, it does perhaps miss the key point—that in the eyes of many West Papuans, the fundamental questions about the legitimacy of the so-called Act of Free Choice undermine the very legitimacy of Indonesian rule in West Papua.

We are now in the 50th anniversary year of the Act of Free Choice, which is understandably seen as an act of great injustice by the people of West Papua, who refer to it ironically as the “Act of No Choice”. In the past 50 years, the West Papuan people have been subjected to serious human rights violations, which have only fuelled and heightened that sense of injustice. Those human rights violations include the repression of free
speech and peaceful assembly, impediments to a free press, arbitrary arrest, and even cases of torture and killings, as we have heard.

The human rights abuses in West Papua are in large part down to the fact that the region is de facto controlled by the Indonesian military. The University of Sydney has estimated that around 15,000 troops are currently deployed in the region. When human rights violations occur, there are inadequate systems of redress for Papuans, so violations often go unpunished. An Amnesty International report on West Papua noted that there is a lack of effort to investigate accusations of human rights violations and to try before civilian courts police officials accused of violations. Furthermore, it noted that allegations of human rights abuses committed by the military in West Papua often go unchecked or are dealt with before military tribunals with no transparency, leaving many victims of human rights violations awaiting justice.

We will all be aware of the case from earlier this year, which we heard about from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). Footage emerged of Indonesian police interrogating a young Papuan boy, who was on the floor and in handcuffs while officers wrapped a large snake around him. The child was alleged to have stolen a mobile phone. In the video, he is heard screaming in fear as officers laugh and push the snake’s head towards his face. In responding to the incident, a UN panel of human rights experts stated that it “reflects a widespread pattern of violence, alleged arbitrary arrests and detention as well as methods amounting to torture used by the Indonesian police and military in Papua”.

They went on to explain that those tactics are often used against indigenous Papuans and that the incident is “symptomatic” of the discrimination West Papuans face from the Indonesian authorities. Papuans are regularly arrested for peacefully expressing their opinions on the political status of West Papua, including through peaceful demonstrations or attending meetings in which the matter is discussed. The simple act of raising the symbol of West Papuan independence, the Morning Star flag, carries a prison sentence of up to 15 years. Pro-independence political leaders have routinely faced persecution and even assassination at the hands of the Indonesian authorities.

At this point, I would like to introduce someone who, I am pleased to say, is in attendance today—Benny Wenda, leader of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, who came to see me recently, along with my constituent Richard Samuelson, who was the first person to bring the situation in West Papua to my attention, and his fiancée Elaine, who are also in attendance. I thank them.

I pay tribute to Richard for bringing this issue to my attention; without going off on too much of a tangent, it shows one of the greatest things about our parliamentary system. Many of us, when we raise issues in the House, do so because they are brought to our attention by constituents in our surgeries, and this is one such case. Richard and Benny made a powerful, moving case to me, and I am only too pleased to raise this issue before Parliament today.

I make that point during this debate as a reminder of the democratic rights and freedoms we enjoy in this country. Richard and Benny could come to see me and make their point freely, knowing they would not be persecuted and that their representative could and would take up the matter on their behalf. Those are rights and freedoms that, sadly, are not enjoyed by too many people around the world.

Benny’s story would bring a tear to the stoniest eye. Benny’s father was, in fact, one of the representatives hand-picked in 1969 to vote in the Act of Free Choice. Benny says that he still remembers his father telling him how he had been threatened and told that he and his whole family would be killed if he voted for Papuan independence.

During our meeting, Benny told me the tragic story, which he says is permanently fixed in his memory, of when, at just three years old, he saw many of his fellow villagers, including most of his family, killed during an Indonesian military operation. Years later, Benny became the leader of the Papuan student independence movement. After being imprisoned, he was able to escape to Oxford, where he was duly granted political asylum by the United Kingdom.

When I met Benny, he expressed with great emotion the gratitude he felt to the United Kingdom, and he spoke with admiration of our values of freedom and the rule of law—principles he said he was determined to see his people in West Papua enjoy. Benny was the one who, earlier this year, presented a petition to the United Nations calling for an independence referendum in West Papua. The petition contained the signatures and thumbprints of some 1.8 million West Papuans, which represents approximately 70% of the entire population.

I turn now to the Minister. What can the UK Government do? I have explained the history and set out the present situation. The question is, what can we do to ensure that the human rights situation improves in West Papua and that the future is brighter for the Papuan people? I accept that the United Kingdom’s power is limited, but I think there are two key areas where we could—and should—apply diplomatic pressure.

We should not downplay our influence. The United Kingdom is a close and important friend of Indonesia. A recent BBC poll found that over 65% of Indonesians take a positive view of the UK’s influence, making Indonesia the country with the second most favourable perception of the United Kingdom in Asia. Therefore, we have a role to play in having these conversations with our Indonesian friends, difficult though they may be.

The first thing I ask the Minister to consider doing is to push for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua. That should not be controversial; indeed, in a February 2018 meeting with the then UN High Commissioner, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, Indonesian President Jokowi invited his office to visit West Papua. Sadly, some 15 months on, that visit has not taken place, and the former UN High Commissioner expressed concern about that in his update to the 38th session of the Human Rights Council.

The Foreign Office, and our representatives in the United Nations, should encourage their Indonesian counterparts to honour that invitation and permit the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua. The UN High Commissioner’s assessment of human rights in West Papua will be critical to informing the world of the situation on the ground and bringing about positive change in the region. I ask the Minister today if he would please commit to raising the issue of this invitation with his Indonesian counterpart and encouraging them to honour it.
The second area where I would suggest the United Kingdom could have a positive influence is in pushing for increased press freedom in West Papua and particularly for greater access for foreign journalists to the region. At present, foreign journalists are essentially banned from West Papua. The few who are granted access are closely monitored by the Indonesian military and by no means allowed to report freely. The BBC’s Indonesia editor, Rebecca Henschke, was granted a special permit to report on a malnutrition crisis in the region last year but was expelled shortly after arriving after posting tweets that “hurt the feelings” of soldiers.

It is therefore unsurprising that Indonesia ranks 124th out of 180 countries in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index of the press freedom charity Reporters Without Borders. The charity concludes that President Jokowi did not keep his campaign promise to address media freedom in West Papua, with his presidency instead seeing drastic restrictions on access for foreign journalists and growing violence against local journalists who seek to report abuses by the Indonesian military.

A free press nurtures free societies. Now, more than ever, we must defend it. That was the message of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office last week as we marked World Press Freedom Day. Never has that been more true than in the case of West Papua. We simply must ensure that journalists are able to report freely in the region, shining a light on wrongdoings when they occur, and generally scrutinising the actions of the authorities in West Papua. Ensuring that that happens will go a long way towards helping to protect the human rights of the West Papuan people.

The UK is in an ideal position to take action on this issue. Last month, the UK Government announced that Amal Clooney had been made a special envoy on media freedom by the FCO and would head up a panel of legal experts looking to repeal anti-press freedom laws abroad and ensure that journalists across the world are free to report the truth. I therefore urge the Minister and the Foreign Secretary to ensure that this important panel, when it is established, investigates the situation in West Papua as a top priority. The panel, which is a wonderful initiative, can look at the restrictive laws that the Indonesian Government have put in place in West Papua, which have essentially created a media blackout in the region, and press the Indonesian Government to repeal them, enabling a free press, transparency and accountability in West Papua.

The simple fact is that the human rights situation in West Papua cannot improve until President Jokowi delivers on his promise to allow greater press freedom in the region, which has thus far failed to happen. The panel therefore represents a golden opportunity to hold the Indonesian Government to their promises, ensuring that their warm words turn into hard action. Ultimately, a free media can prevail in West Papua, and I therefore hope that the Minister will assure me that he will make strong representations to the Foreign Secretary and Amal Clooney that West Papua must be an area of focus for the Defend Media Freedom panel.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; he is extremely generous. Will he add to his wish list the suggestion that the British Government use all their efforts and influence in Indonesia to secure access to West Papua for non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International and the Red Cross? They have had difficulty visiting the area to see what is going on.

Robert Courts: That is a very sensible suggestion. I wonder whether the Minister will add that. Ultimately, I think the hon. Gentleman and I are looking for transparency, access and freedom, all of which are tied together.

John Howell: I wonder whether my hon. Friend will add to his list of things that could be done something that the University of Sydney has called for: a comprehensive investigation into the killing of Papuans by Indonesian forces. At the moment, we are left with the Asian Human Rights Commission, which produced a report in 2013 showing the savagery of Indonesian forces in dealing with this situation.

Robert Courts: I am grateful for that suggestion. I am keen that the Minister takes away two or three things that we may be able to achieve in the near future, and I am of course happy to add that request to the list. Ultimately, I think we are all making the same point, which is that an investigation carried out by an NGO or the press will achieve largely the same ends: transparency, clarity and an understanding of what is taking place in West Papua. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for adding that suggestion to the list.

In conclusion, I leave the Minister with two modest requests from myself—and two from hon. Members—which, if followed through and achieved, could be immensely significant. They ought not to be controversial, as they essentially ask the Indonesian Government to honour promises they have already made. The first request is that the Minister encourages his counterparts in the Indonesian Government to honour that February 2018 invitation to the Office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua, and the second is that he ensures that the new FCO panel for press freedom investigations the situation in West Papua as a top priority.

If we can ensure the free access of international media and independent human rights observers to West Papua, we will have taken an enormous step forward in protecting the human rights of the Papuan people, putting the region on the road towards a more free and prosperous future. I hope the Minister will be able to assure me and all others who have attended the debate—I note that the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), is here, and I welcome him—that he will take up these issues on behalf of the people of West Papua, whose cries for help have for far too long gone unanswered. The debate has helped give a voice to the voiceless. I hope the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be able to help too.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespersons no later than 5.8 pm. The guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party spokesperson, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition’s spokesperson and 10 minutes for the Minister. If the Minister will allow Robert Courts two minutes at the
end to sum up the debate, that would be fantastic. Until 5.8 pm is Back-Bench time. Two Members are seeking to contribute, so there will be a time limit of six minutes each.

4.56 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): We think we know all about the great injustices of the world: people who have been killed, had their human rights transgressed, been illegally imprisoned and seen their calls for a right to self-determination unanswered. However, West Papua is the forgotten struggle. I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for giving us the opportunity to highlight the plight of West Papua, for his explanation of the history and an overview of the actions of successive Indonesian Governments against West Papua, and for the requests he made to the Minister, which I shall add to. I will not repeat any of those points, but I will say that, in the 50 years of Indonesian control, there is significant evidence of genocide.

Yale Law School, in a 2004 report for the Indonesia Human Rights Network, found “in the available evidence a strong indication that the Indonesian government has committed genocide against the West Papuans”. The Indonesian military have also carried out widespread acts of torture and sexual assault against the native Papuans—a point I made in a debate yesterday on women human rights defenders.

The people of West Papua have been campaigning since 1969, and many have had to flee and campaign from their new homes. A united campaign representing all those in the West Papuan diaspora and in West Papua, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, was formed in 2014, bringing together all the campaigns. The Free West Papua campaign is based in the UK and supports the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, which I chair. As the hon. Member for Witney said, Benny Wenda, who lives in Oxford, is the chair of the Free West Papua campaign and the United Liberation Movement for West Papua. I put on the record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and her predecessor, Andrew Smith, for their years of support for Benny and the campaign.

The bringing together of the organisations has led to major steps forward recently, one of which was the Westminster declaration calling for an internationally supervised vote for independence, signed in 2016 by representatives of Governments of four Pacific states and parliamentarians from around the world; since then, other parliamentarians, including me, have signed up to the declaration. As the hon. Gentleman said, West Papuans, in secret and often in fear of discovery, collected a petition calling for the right to vote for independence, which was signed by 1.8 million people. That petition has now been presented to the UN. I thank the Minister for the meeting prior to that petition being presented, and look forward to future meetings regarding the petition.

However, my main comments regard incidents in Nduga province. I recently met members of the World Council of Churches on their return from West Papua, who gave me a report that highlighted that Indonesian security forces allegedly fired large-calibre machine guns and dropped grenades from helicopters in areas inhabited by indigenous local communities. While the Indonesian military continue to deny access to the province for human rights organisations, journalists, human rights defenders and observers, a rescue team consisting of local government and civil society representatives was able to collect data in some of the affected areas.

According to recent reports, security forces killed at least nine indigenous Papuans, while at least five indigenous Papuans, including two minors, have been reported missing since the commencement of military operations. Witnesses have stated that many displaced villagers continue to hide in the jungle, where they live in small groups in improvised huts. The men leave the shelter during the night and walk long distances to collect sweet potatoes and taro. They do so under fear of murder. The harsh climate and food scarcity in the central Papuan highlands have particularly affected women and children. According to local human rights defenders, at least 13 have died because of starvation after fleeing villages.

I want to use this opportunity to highlight the fact that Indonesian armed forces have been accused of deploying chemical weapons—suspected to be white phosphorus, banned under international law—in West Papua, Indonesia’s easternmost territory. I am referring to international humanitarian law, because this is an issue of contention. Under the convention on the prohibition of the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and on their destruction, which Indonesia has signed and ratified—in fact, it sits on the committee—states are banned from using and stockpiling chemical weapons.

ABC, which is the Australian equivalent of the BBC, reported in December claims that wounds may have been inflicted by white phosphorus. The report had photos of the canisters and wounds. I have more photos, from the World Council of Churches, which I can provide to the Minister. I wrote to the Minister regarding this situation, and he responded to me, but I feel that the Minister’s letter could have been written by the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology.

Before I wrote to the Minister, the Indonesian embassy wrote to me, saying: “I deeply regret that such motion was based on groundless reporting, most notably by Australia’s The Saturday Paper throughout its January to February 2019 articles. No significant evidence has been subsequently produced despite the strong claims made by the authors.”

In the Minister’s letter to me, he said: “We are aware of a media claim, first made in The Saturday Paper on 22 December 2018, about the possible use of white phosphorus.”

It was not just The Saturday Paper, which is a small paper in Australia; it was ABC and many other media outlets that reported the claims. I am sure that the Minister would not want people to think that the United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office was subservient to the Indonesian Government on these matters, so I once again urge the Minister to write to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to ask it to investigate this issue as an international priority. I request that the Minister immediately send an official request to the OPCW, asking the organisation to verify the incident and investigate the suspected breach of Indonesia’s obligations under the chemical weapons convention. If no investigations are conducted, if no light is shone into the dark underbelly of the military occupation of West Papua by Indonesia, how will we know what is going on?
Before I have to finish, I want to make just one more point about the letter from the Minister. He says:

“The use of white phosphorus is not banned under international law”.

I ask him whether the UK Government are going to call for the banning of white phosphorous, because when it is used against civilians, it is a chemical weapon; it is exactly that type of weapon and should be banned under international law.

5.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for securing the debate and for the very powerful contribution that he made in setting the scene for us and explaining his interest in the subject. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. We recognise his commitment to his role, which he carries out very well. We often say this, but it is the truth: I very much look forward to hearing the Minister’s remarks.

I am very interested in human rights issues and always have been. That has been one of the big issues for me in my time in the House. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, but today I will speak about human rights issues; I want to put those on the record. Whether we are talking about discrimination or abuse and whether it is emotional, physical or financial, I am happy to take it on. I am talking about discrimination or abuse and whether it is emotional, physical or financial, I am happy to take it on. I am happy to take whatever opportunity comes my way to speak up for people—to be, as the hon. Member for Witney said, a voice for the voiceless, and to speak for those whom no one else is speaking for, at least in this place.

According to Amnesty International, the people of Papua are subject to severe human rights violations at the hands of Indonesian authorities. Amnesty’s 2002 report on Indonesia found that counter-insurgency operations by security forces in West Papua had resulted in gross human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary detentions.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the elections as well. In Northern Ireland some time ago, in the early years of the troubles—1969 or thereabouts—people used the term “gerrymandering”, as in gerrymandering the democratic process. I am reminded very much of that, except that in this case, the result was very final. As terrible as it is to fix elections by intimidation and threats of violence, the reality for West Papuans is even worse. A paper prepared by Yale Law School in 2004 found evidence that strongly indicates that the Indonesian Government have committed genocide against the West Papuans and that, at the very least, the Indonesian Government have committed crimes against humanity against them.

Despite those crimes, authorities in West Papua operate with impunity. In March 2018, the mysterious death in police custody of Rico Ayomi, a 17-year-old student, from alleged alcohol poisoning underscored the police’s lack of accountability for deaths of Papuans. From 2010 to 2018, security forces were responsible for an estimated 95 deaths in 69 incidents, 39 of which were related to peaceful political activities such as demonstrations or raising the Papuan independence flag. No security force personnel have been convicted in civilian courts for those deaths, and only a handful of cases have led to disciplinary measures or military trials. It is outrageous and unacceptable that none of those cases has been answered. Those who have committed crimes need to be brought to the courts for those crimes—for their brutality.

The brutality of the Indonesian Government in cracking down on separatists has created an environment in which anyone suspected of supporting Papuan independence can become subject to human rights violations by police and security forces, including unlawful killing, torture and beating. Thus the rights of West Papuans to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are heavily curtailed. In today’s debate, we are speaking for those people and ensuring that their voices are heard. Many people are imprisoned simply for having taken part in non-violent demonstrations or expressed their opinions. Here we are expressing our opinion, and we can do that freely. Why should they not be able express their opinion?

Similarly, international human rights organisations and journalists face severe restrictions on their ability to work freely and visit the area. Human Rights Watch reports that just last year, two foreign journalists were harassed for alleged illegal reporting. They were BBC correspondent Rebecca Henschke, arrested in February, and Polish freelancer Jakub Fabian Skrzypski, arrested in August.

The oppression of the media and freedom of expression ensures that the terrible oppression of West Papuans continues away from the international community’s awareness. I do not believe that we, as part of the international community, can sit back and do nothing. That is why this debate and those in other parts of the world are so important. It is vital that we take every opportunity that we have to publicly stand in solidarity with those who are suffering in West Papua and to say to the Indonesian Government, “The world is watching you. We will not simply forget.” The opportunity to speak for the people of West Papua has been given to us today. We look to the Minister for a response and we hope that the influence that we can exert on Indonesia can bring about change.

5.7 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and congratulate him on initiating this debate. As he pointed out, it is the first one that this place has had on this subject ever. I appreciated the very powerful remarks that he made and I am glad that they are now on the record. I look forward to hearing a response to some of the points that he raised with the Minister, who I know takes this matter seriously as well.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has just said to us, it is important to have a voice, because we have to tell the Indonesian authorities that the world is watching; the world is paying attention. It is important to raise and highlight human rights violations and lack of self-determination wherever that occurs in the world. That is what makes this debate on West Papua so timely.

The SNP unequivocally condemns any human rights violations, regardless of where in the world they occur. We find the reports that have come out about human rights violations incredibly concerning. We have seen some reports about the use of chemical weapons as well. The hon. Member for Witney quoted a comment from the UN panel of experts:

[Alex Sobel]
“This case reflects a widespread pattern of violence, alleged arbitrary arrests and detention as well as methods amounting to torture used by the Indonesian police and military in Papua”. That should be hugely concerning to all of us. The hon. Gentleman was right, as were other hon. Members, including the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). He and his colleagues are doing good work in pushing for a full investigation of the situation.

The hon. Member for Witney was right that self-determination goes to the heart of this issue. The right of people to choose how they are governed is a fundamental pillar of the international rules-based order. We should all be significantly concerned that the decision to unify with Indonesia—the Act of Free Choice, as it was called, or the Act of No Choice, as others have referred to it—was made with one in 800 citizens having the vote. Even those one in 800 voters, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out and as Mr Wenda has testified, may not have had a free and fair vote. That is a very significant issue. What moves does the Minister have to raise that issue of self-determination, which is so important in this case? What discussions has he had with the Indonesian authorities and representatives of West Papua?

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I apologise for not being here for the whole debate. I had commitments in Committee and the main Chamber. I first met Benny Wenda several years ago when he visited the Scottish Parliament. He was hosted by our good friend Aileen Campbell, who is now a Minister in the Scottish Government. I had the pleasure of meeting him again this morning with his colleagues.

Self-determination is crucial. Regardless of an individual’s views on whether a given community should be an independent state or country, the people who live there and self-identify as part of that nation or community should have the right to a free and fair choice. Understandably, the Scottish National party has always been very proud to support that.

Stephen Gethins: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I want to add that Mr Wenda is always very welcome in the Scottish Parliament. I also add my voice to the key actions raised, including pushing for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit. That visit must take place. I know that the Minister will make that point in the strongest possible terms. The press must also have the freedom to visit. If there is nothing to hide, they should show that. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) made a good additional point about letting international NGOs, such as Amnesty International and others, be part of any delegation.

I want to leave time for the Minister to respond. I add my voice to the points that have already been made. I know that the Minister has heard those points loud and clear.

5.12 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on raising an extremely important issue, which he did very well. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who is an extremely energetic champion for the people of West Papua.

Several hon. Members have talked about the history and I agree with their analysis. There has been some discussion of the human rights situation. It is extremely disappointing that the human rights situation in West Papua is still so bad, because the situation in other parts of Indonesia has improved significantly over the past 20 years. One would hope that the people of West Papua would have benefited from that as well.

I want to raise a couple of particular episodes. First, at the beginning of last December more than 500 Papuans were arrested after peaceful demonstrations to commemorate the birth of the West Papuan nation in 1961. Days later West Papua Liberation Army militants attacked and killed 20 construction workers in the Nduga region. Some 300 villagers had to flee to escape the subsequent military sweep following the attack.

The British Government have slightly more power than the hon. Member for Witney suggested, because the UK is currently the penholder in the UN Security Council for the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Innocent West Papuans are clearly not getting the protection they so badly need. They are being treated as legitimate targets by the Indonesian military. I would be grateful if the Minister would explain what his Department is doing about that.

Alex Sobel: In a letter to me the Minister described that incident as “proportionate”. Would my hon. Friend describe the actions of the Indonesian army as proportionate or disproportionate?

Helen Goodman: They are most clearly disproportionate.

I want to talk about the use of white phosphorous. I believe that white phosphorous was used inappropriately, because I had meetings with Octovianus Mote, the deputy chairman and former general secretary of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, who had direct testimony from people in the area, and with Ian Martin, the former head of the UN mission, which conducted the self-determination referendum in East Timor.

We need to be really specific about this matter: white phosphorous is not banned under the chemical weapons convention, but its military use is circumscribed by protocol III of the UN convention on certain conventional weapons. However, it is prohibited in all circumstances to use it against civilians. It is also prohibited to make any military objective located within a concentration of civilians the object of attack by air-delivered incendiary weapons, which is what happened on this occasion. I entirely support those calls to send in experts from the UN and the OPCW, to look at what happened. I heard stories of old people being burned out of their homes.

Furthermore, I would like the Minister to suggest to the Indonesian military—it seems to be out of control in West Papua—that peacekeeping duties be assigned instead of the Indonesian military. I had meetings with Octovianus Mote, the deputy chairman and former general secretary of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, who had direct testimony from people in the area, and with Ian Martin, the former head of the UN mission, which conducted the self-determination referendum in East Timor.

We need to be really specific about this matter: white phosphorous is not banned under the chemical weapons convention, but its military use is circumscribed by protocol III of the UN convention on certain conventional weapons. However, it is prohibited in all circumstances to use it against civilians. It is also prohibited to make any military objective located within a concentration of civilians the object of attack by air-delivered incendiary weapons, which is what happened on this occasion. I entirely support those calls to send in experts from the UN and the OPCW, to look at what happened. I heard stories of old people being burned out of their homes.

Furthermore, I would like the Minister to suggest to the Indonesian military—it seems to be out of control in West Papua—that peacekeeping duties be assigned instead of the local police. As well as the UN-led investigation into white phosphorus, we need to see the release of political prisoners and the recognition of local political parties, to facilitate the development of a political and civil society in West Papua. I hope that the Government will review any sales of military equipment to Indonesia.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for securing this
important debate. I am also grateful for the insights and contributions of the hon. Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for the Front-Bench contributions. I will endeavour to answer all the questions, and I will respond in writing to those that I do not answer now.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the UK and Indonesia. I am very pleased to say that the relationship is flourishing. Indonesia is an important democratic partner in the G20 and, for the next two years, on the UN Security Council. In that context, we follow the situation in Papua very seriously. We welcome President Joko Widodo’s commitment to a peaceful and prosperous Papua, but we recognise that the historical challenges are significant. Many of those challenges stem from the disputes over resources and governance, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, and from unresolved human rights grievances.

Although the UK Government wholeheartedly respect the territorial integrity of Indonesia, with the province of Papua and West Papua as integral parts, it is important, within that framework, that the authorities address the needs and aspirations of the Papuan people.

We are concerned by the sporadic outbreaks of violence in Papua, and by reports of alleged human rights violations by the security forces. We will continue to press the Indonesian authorities to strengthen their human rights protections and to address the legitimate concerns of the people, including by ensuring that they benefit from sustainable and equitable development, and of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) in relation to the building of a civic society that allows free political parties.

There are serious and long-standing concerns about the influence and actions of the Indonesian security forces in Papua. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and I believe that it is regrettable that, despite improvements since the restoration of democracy in Indonesia in 1998, there remains persistent reporting of worrying human rights violations in Papua. Meanwhile, there has been no real accountability for the serious abuses of the past.

When I met the Indonesian ambassador to London in January, I raised those issues with him, not least because I had recently met with the all-party group, and in the light of the contemporary violence in Nduga, where armed groups had attacked construction workers, resulting in the deaths of 19 people. We urged the Indonesian authorities then to ensure that any security response is proportionate. As has been rightly and universally recognised, however, under successive democratically elected Governments there has been a noticeable improvement in the overall human rights situation across Indonesia and an end to the debilitating conflicts in East Timor, Aceh, Ambon and elsewhere.

During their recent phone call, the UK Prime Minister praised the President of Indonesia for the peaceful conduct of the presidential and legislative elections in April, which represented the single largest one-day democratic event anywhere in the world, with an 80% voter turnout and more than 800,000 polling stations operating across the archipelago. Although there were some long delays, including in Papua, there has been no evidence to suggest that it was anything other than a well-run and credible election. Nevertheless, we will continue to raise our concerns about issues such as the freedom of expression and assembly and the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

In reference to media freedom in Papua, which was raised by several hon. Members, UK officials regularly raise the importance of media access to Papua with the Indonesian Government, and they will continue to do so.

Our embassy in Jakarta is active in promoting press freedom across the entirety of Indonesia, where there is already a vibrant media environment. To mark World Press Freedom Day last week, the embassy arranged a full programme of activities to celebrate the work of Indonesia’s journalists, media organisations and regulators in that regard.

Although President Jokowi has said that foreign journalists should be allowed to access Papua without pre-conditions, unfortunately we understand that Indonesian officials continue to place substantial practical obstacles in the way of that taking place. Transparency and media access are important to give us a fuller picture of the situation. We also encourage all Indonesian journalists to write openly and frankly about Papua to ensure that local perspectives are properly heard and are part of the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney made a point about the panel to defend media freedoms, which has not yet had its first meeting, as I understand. It will be for its members to determine its work and to plan its initial areas of focus. It would not be appropriate for the UK Government to seek to dictate them, because in many ways that would undermine the important sense of its independence.

We regularly press for the release of political prisoners across Papua. Under President Jokowi, the number has fallen from 37 in 2014 to fewer than 10 today. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have acknowledged that positive trend, but we continue to make the case that 10 political prisoners remains too many. Moreover, we are concerned that three people were charged with treason in January after apparently taking part in a peaceful prayer event. We call, here and now, for all political prisoners to be released immediately, and for the Indonesian authorities to ensure that all detainees are given the right to a fair trial.

We will continue to request updates on the historical human rights cases in Papua that President Jokowi has committed to resolve. We will keep the pressure up in the aftermath of the elections. Initial investigations have been conducted by the National Commission on Human Rights, but they need to be properly dealt with by the Attorney General’s office.

On phosphorus, I am happy to have further conversations with the hon. Members for Bishop Auckland and for Leeds North West about the issue, but our investigations have not substantiated the media claims that it was used in violation of the chemical weapons convention—as was rightly pointed out, it is prohibited in all cases against civilians. Therefore, we do not believe that there is a case for referral to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, but I am more than happy to look at any additional written or other evidence that the hon. Gentleman has. Clearly, we would then be happy to take the matter up.

As has been pointed out, President Jokowi has visited Papua 10 times during his first term, which is far more than any previous Indonesian President. He has made a number of important democratic commitments, including...
to establish a constructive political dialogue with Papuan groups. That process represents a credible opportunity to address long-held grievances, and in our discussions with the Indonesian Government we will urge them to deliver on those commitments. I very much hope that the recent sad but peaceful passing of Pastor Neles Tebay, the Papuan priest who has been at the forefront of attempts to create a peaceful dialogue on the future of Papua, might inspire progress to honour his legacy, led by the team that the President has appointed to foster a dialogue.

I agree that the Act of Free Choice was an utterly flawed process, but I have to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, and to the Chamber, that there is no desire in the international community for reopening the question. The UK, along with other members of the UN, supports Indonesia’s territorial integrity.

We will continue to support efforts by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and her officials to arrange the visit to Papua, at the invitation of the Indonesian Government. Officials in our embassy in Jakarta have discussed the proposed visit with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and have encouraged Indonesia to agree dates as soon as possible. I also undertake to raise the proposed visit with my Indonesian counterparts. I hope to make a substantially long visit to Indonesia later in the year.

Facilitating a visit to Papua would help the Indonesian Government to demonstrate their commitment to the rights and freedoms of those residing there. It would also help to underline the seriousness with which they take their candidacy for a seat on the Human Rights Council. Being a member of the UN Security Council also provides us with an opportunity to speak fairly openly in New York on the issue.

It is clear that economic factors are a major source of grievance among the Papuan people, and a source of strain in their relationship with the central Government and local authorities. That is why we will continue to support Indonesia’s regional governments to develop a green economy in which people can make a living without over-exploiting their natural resources, and in which there is greater regulatory oversight of the timber industry, which has been fundamentally linked to the social conflict.

I end by saying that the Government will continue to take a close interest in human rights in Papua. I am pleased that a number of MPs are passionate about that. I enjoy their passion and it provides us with the opportunity to make a serious case to our Indonesian counterparts, which we will do. Above all, that expression of interest is in the interests of all the people of Papua and the rest of Indonesia.

5.28 pm

Robert Courts: I thank the Minister for his full and comprehensive response, and every hon. Member for taking part. Once again, I welcome Benny Wenda and my constituent Richard Samuelson to the Public Gallery. I thank them for having initiated the debate and I hope that they think it has advanced the cause of human rights in West Papua.

I am grateful to all hon. Members for their points. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for what I will summarise as his robust response to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his point about access to justice; the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) for underlining my points about the visit of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and press freedom; and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for making the point about political prisoners.

I assure the Minister that I have heard everything he has said and I am glad that the FCO regularly raises the issue of press freedom. I underline the point that the Act of Free Choice lies at the heart of the real repression and the feeling of ill-justice, which are central to the cause. In the 70th year of diplomatic relations, I hope that the Minister and the FCO will continue and redouble their efforts, having heard how strongly hon. Members feel. On the panel to defend media freedoms, I understand its independence; I do not ask that the UK Government dictate to it but merely make suggestions.

We have made great strides today. I am grateful to you for having listened to us in detail, Mr Hollobone. We have cast a searching gaze on the human rights situation in West Papua. We must ensure that we do not look away.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered human rights in West Papua.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 May 2019

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Pre-eclampsia

1.30 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pre-eclampsia.

I am delighted to have secured a debate on this important issue, and I thank my colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee for supporting it. The debate is timely because we are approaching World Pre-Eclampsia Day on 22 May. According to the House of Commons Library, the House has never had a debate about this extremely important matter, which affects every constituency, and every country in the world. Although I am surprised that there has been no previous debate, I am delighted that we are here today to put that right and to have what I hope will be a constructive, illuminating and considered debate. Before I proceed, however, I must say that I am extremely disappointed by the apparent lack of concern about this issue across the House, as we can see from the number of Members in the Chamber. Women and families who are concerned about pre-eclampsia will be equally disappointed by the poor turnout.

I want to pay particular tribute to Marcus Green, the chief executive of Action on Pre-Eclampsia, and all his team for all the support and information they have provided to me and all Members to help ensure that this debate is as well-informed as it needs to be. I applaud the work of Marcus, his team and others, including at the University of Liverpool, who expend huge personal and professional effort to combat and better understand the appalling condition of pre-eclampsia. I thank those who research this illness to help us better treat and manage it, because their work is ultimately about improving survival rates for mothers and babies when this condition occurs.

Pre-eclampsia is a very serious disease related to high blood pressure. It can strike out of the blue with no apparent warning—the word “eclampsia” is Greek for lightning. It can strike any pregnant woman, most notably in the second half of pregnancy, or up to six weeks after delivery. It is a symptom of new-onset hypertension and significant protein in the urine after the 20th week of pregnancy. There is no cure for pre-eclampsia, which is why treatment and management of the condition matter so much.

Identifying pre-eclampsia early is so important for mothers and babies; it can literally mean the difference between life and death. Globally, pre-eclampsia accounts for 14% of all maternal deaths, killing 40,000 women every year. Five women every hour die from pregnancy complications related to pre-eclampsia. Not surprisingly, poor outcomes for mother and baby are associated with poor care, which is most often found in low-income countries. Across the United Kingdom, our NHS services still face significant challenges with regards to pre-eclampsia.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is very sorry not to be here, suffered a stillbirth due to pre-eclampsia. My personal interest in this issue was sparked by the death of my son Kenneth, who was stillborn two days after his due date, after his birth was delayed while he was still alive and healthy. No reason was given for that delay; in fact, when I reported back to the hospital the same day in terrible pain—a few hours after being told my baby would not be delivered that day as planned—I faced obstruction and argument. I was repeatedly told to go home as there was nothing wrong. How that could have been established when I had not been examined was a question that was never answered, then or since. My husband insisted that I be admitted to hospital. I was later informed that had he not done so, I would certainly have died.

According to a leading consultant obstetrician, Professor Edward Shaxted of Northampton General Hospital, had NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde reacted to the clear signs of my pre-eclampsia when I attended the maternity unit in pain, our otherwise healthy 8 lb 7 oz son would in all likelihood have survived. My husband and I commissioned a report from Professor Edward Shaxted after waiting for over a year in vain for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to engage with us after the stillbirth.

When I reported to the hospital, I was neither examined, tested nor treated, but I was—bizarrely—.injected with morphine twice. By the following morning, baby Kenneth was dead. I had developed a very severe form of pre-eclampsia called HELLP syndrome, a condition that is life-threatening to mother and baby. Not only did my baby die, but my husband was summoned to be told to say his goodbyes to me, as I was not expected to survive following a rupture of the liver. I was in a critical condition, and spent a number of weeks in a high-dependency unit.

While the mortality rate for HELLP syndrome is estimated by some to be as high as a massive 30%, Professor Shaxted’s report described the errors made in my case as “extraordinary”. He said:

“With a little thought it would have been recognised that Mrs Gibson had developed pre-eclampsia.”

My concerns were ignored despite the fact that my baby was due for delivery. The professor went on to say:

“Delivery of Mrs Gibson’s baby while still alive”—on my due date, as planned—

“would more likely than not have led to the birth of a live child who would have survived intact.”

His conclusion was echoed by Professor Benjamin Stenson of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, from whom we also commissioned a report. Anecdotally, I know that this experience is not unique to me.

We must continue to strive to do better at monitoring pregnant women and to listen to what they tell us, because being aware of, looking out for and dealing with pre-eclampsia must be on the radar of all professionals dealing with expectant mothers on the frontline. Recognition of the condition and early intervention are vital. When the signs are present, it is important they are not missed. Overall, maternal mortality across the UK has much reduced over the generations, but there must be no room for complacency, as there appeared to be in my case, and as I know there has been in others. I was labelled high risk, having undergone five years of in vitro fertilisation and being over 40.
When mistakes are made, they cannot be undone, but if we do not learn from them, that is disgraceful and completely unacceptable. Despite low levels of maternal deaths, there are still unacceptable levels of stillbirths and babies born being prematurely and/or underweight because of pre-eclampsia. Significant numbers of women suffer from pre-eclampsia in pregnancy. We know that screening and diagnosis are the cornerstones of safe management, and that deaths are preventable with good-quality routine antenatal care in pregnancy and evidence-based guidelines for antenatal care and the management of hypertension in pregnancy.

However, according to the Library, no NHS in the UK collects official statistics on the number of women who develop pre-eclampsia during pregnancy. We do know that there are around two maternal deaths due to pre-eclampsia every year in the UK, but no figures are recorded for how many babies die due to pre-eclampsia-related issues, although research by Imperial College London puts the figure at around 1,000 babies each year across the UK.

There is also no information published about how much pre-eclampsia costs the NHS across the UK. The lack of detailed information on this issue is quite staggering. I urge the Minister to ensure that such information is collected and recorded. I will lobby the Scottish Government to do the same. We need clear information to know the true scale of the challenge we are facing. One of the keys to meeting such a significant challenge is clear information.

This is a complex illness. It cannot be predicted with certainty who will develop pre-eclampsia or what causes it, although risk factors can be identified, including having a strong family history of pre-eclampsia, being over 40 years old, and being overweight or obese. Evidence appears to suggest that black and Asian women are more likely than white women to develop pre-eclampsia, which requires further investigation. It seems that black women are five times more likely than white women to develop pre-eclampsia, and that Asian women are twice as likely to develop it. We need to understand better why that is and to treat such patients accordingly.

There is also evidence that women who develop pre-eclampsia in pregnancy are at greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease and kidney disease in the longer term, shortening their life expectancy. At the moment, no part of the UK has standard care pathways to monitor the long-term health of women who have had pre-eclampsia. That needs to change. I urge the Minister to address that, and I will continue my conversations on that matter with the Cabinet Secretary for Health in Scotland, Jeane Freeman MSP.

The only cure for pre-eclampsia—if we can call it a cure—is the delivery of the baby, but that often means the baby being delivered dangerously prematurely, which throws up all kinds of moral dilemmas and is not always straightforward. Of course, pre-eclampsia is a progressive condition, which gets worse, so mother and baby need close and careful monitoring. We know that babies born underweight or prematurely are at greater risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes in later life. We need ongoing research to find better treatments that reduce the risks to children whose mothers suffer from pre-eclampsia.

Let me say a little about the placental growth factor test. The symptoms and signs of pre-eclampsia are not always reliable or consistent, meaning that women may be admitted to hospital unnecessarily or have a severe case of pre-eclampsia that goes undiagnosed. Like too many other women, I know how tragic that can be. The PLGF test is a new blood test that indicates whether an expectant mother has the disease. When it is used on a woman with suspected pre-eclampsia, it can reliably indicate whether they will need delivery soon and whether the baby is at risk. It can also show whether the woman needs to be admitted to hospital and requires intensive monitoring to determine when delivery should take place, or whether it is safe to discharge her. Its use means that several other tests, which may not be so reliable, do not need to be done, saving our hospitals time and other resources. The PLGF test is available, and it must be provided regardless of where in the UK people live. I urge the Minister to do all she can to ensure that that is the case.

The PLGF test is an important tool that will help us make progress in combating pre-eclampsia by improving its diagnosis and treatment. NHS England will soon make the test available, and I am in negotiations with Jeane Freeman about it being made available in Scotland, too. The test is too important and too accurate, and the information it can yield too informative, for it not to be made available where necessary by health services across the UK. It will not just save lives; it will save money, and it will offer expectant parents huge reassurance about the health of their baby.

The Lancet published a study of implementation in England, which demonstrated that the test improved cost and clinical outcomes, with a 64% reduction in time to diagnosis, a 37% reduction in out-patient visits, and a 35% reduction in the use of bed nights for neonatal care. It seems that it is something of a breakthrough, and I think it has the potential to save many lives. With around 1,000 babies dying every year in the UK due to complications related to pre-eclampsia, this simple test offers real hope and gives us cause for optimism. It is a real milestone in how we treat this horrible condition, which can strike expectant mothers with no warning but with devastating, life-changing consequences for families. I hope that, one day, it offers real hope to women across the world—especially those in poorer countries—that mothers and their babies need no longer die.

World Pre-Eclampsia Day on 22 May deserves a place on our calendars. It deserves to be recognised this year and every year. More than 30 organisations recognise it, including Action on Pre-Eclampsia, Save the Children, the Preeclampsia Foundation and a whole range of others around the world. I urge the Government to ensure that more research is carried out into the condition so that better preventive work, as well as more and better treatments, can be developed. I urge the Minister to do all she can to ensure that women are educated about the condition and about how they might recognise and mitigate it.

As we approach World Pre-Eclampsia Day, this debate matters. Pre-eclampsia is killing our babies, and I believe we can and should be able to detect and treat it more effectively. I absolutely support the call from Action on Pre-Eclampsia to prioritise research into stillbirths from pre-eclampsia and to increase resources to support parents...
through the trauma of that. The UK has the lowest incidence of maternal mortality from pre-eclampsia in the world—that is not an accident; it is down to better care and attentive clinicians—but we have not found a cure. Until we do, and until we completely stop babies dying from this condition, we need to do more.

This is the very first debate on pre-eclampsia, and it is long overdue. I urge the Minister and the Government to commit to doing all they can to improve research, treatment and detection. We have come some way—we can see that from the number of deaths of mothers—but we must remember that 1,000 babies are stillborn as a result of this condition every year, so we certainly are not there yet. Let us work together to make as much progress as we possibly can.

1.47 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I had not intended to make a speech, but I was ashamed by the lack of Back-Bench contributors and felt moved to do so, rather than making an intervention. I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing the debate. Despite the poor attendance, this is an extremely important issue; the figures she outlined speak for themselves and do not need repeating by me.

I am here because my wife had pre-eclampsia during both her pregnancies. It was particularly acute during her first pregnancy, with my daughter Emma. The care she received when she was eventually admitted was exemplary. I could not fault it; it was fantastic from start to finish. However, in a similar vein to my hon. Friend’s experience, when my wife was first sent to hospital by her GP, having presented feeling nauseous and light-headed and with various other symptoms, she was not taken entirely seriously when she got there. Her blood pressure was up and down, and at one point she was accused of white coat syndrome and sent home. But she knew her own body, and she did not feel right at all, so she phoned up, went back to the hospital and was eventually admitted.

My hon. Friend is right that, even now, awareness and diagnosis of pre-eclampsia is still not good enough and must be improved. Despite its prevalence, pre-eclampsia does not get the attention or research it deserves. The fact that I am the only other Back-Bench speaker is probably a testament to that. My eldest was born six and a half weeks early, at 3 lb 10 oz, in an emergency caesarean. After an extended stay in hospital, she was eventually admitted.

Many mothers with pre-eclampsia will give birth prematurely, and premature birth is an issue we have discussed in this Chamber of late. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who will speak for the SNP from the Front Bench, will talk more about that. My daughter Emma was born six and a half weeks premature, and once she was born my wife, who had had a caesarean section, sent me straight back to work, because she wanted my paternity leave to coincide with her arriving back from hospital so that I could help around the house. It does not feel natural in the slightest to go back to work with a daughter in an incubator and a wife recovering from surgery, but back to work I went, because that was her wish.

I went back to work and spoke with colleagues, receiving their congratulations and so on. About an hour and a half after getting in, I was pulled into the office by my boss, who essentially sent me straight back to the hospital—I was given additional paid leave for as long as I required it. I was extremely lucky, but that was only because my boss and another colleague had had similar experiences, so they were in a position to help me and my wife. However, it should not be down to luck. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East will go into more detail, but I fully back the calls made by him and the all-party parliamentary group on premature and sick babies for extended parental leave in such circumstances. I hope that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will publish the report on its review as soon as possible.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran once again on bringing forward the debate. I sincerely hope that this is the important first step in giving this condition the attention it deserves at parliamentary and governmental level.

1.52 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is, as always, an immense pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing and opening the debate. Ahead of World Pre-Eclampsia Day later this month, the debate timeously highlights a hugely important issue surrounding prenatal health. She spoke with a personal understanding that sadly will resonate with many other families right across the UK. The fact that she can stand up and talk about something so deeply personal should be valued. That is not easy. She did so when many others would sit back and say, “I’m not willing to put myself in that space.” I am sure I speak on behalf of the Chamber in saying that we should be hugely appreciative of that.

This is not an easy subject to talk about, but my hon. Friend did so in a considered and sensitive manner. I very much commend her for putting pre-eclampsia on the parliamentary agenda for the first time. I heard her say earlier in the week that this was the first time it was to be debated, and I confess that I doubted that, but she confirmed today that it is the first time that it has been debated in the House of Commons. I hope that this will be not just one set-piece event to mark World Pre-Eclampsia Day, but the beginning of a conversation in this place.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who stood up and contributed without notes, again referring to his personal experience and that of his wife, Lynn, with the birth of Emma and Eilidh. It is no secret that he is a genuine friend of mine and somebody I spend personal time with—not just time with here as a Member of Parliament. He is also real ally in the campaign to extend paid parental leave for parents of premature and sick babies. I am all the richer for having him at my side as together we battle the UK Government.
Pre-eclampsia has been at the forefront of my mind recently. Some in the Chamber will know that my wife Roslyn had a baby late last year and that her type 1 diabetes complicated the pregnancy. In addition to the complications we experienced during her first pregnancy with our son Isaac, we were acutely aware that diabetes increases the risk of pre-eclampsia by a factor of between two and four. I know from that experience that it is a real source of stress for expectant parents, particularly those with multiple risk factors for pre-eclampsia.

Pre-eclampsia is traditionally difficult to diagnose. Women with pre-eclampsia are often asymptomatic, and conventional diagnosis methods that look at hypertension and urinary protein levels can be subject to observer error. Therefore, the recently published findings of the Parrot trial into placental growth factor testing are a game-changer, showing that the time it takes for clinicians to diagnose the condition can be significantly reduced. Alongside clinical assessment, the testing can also be used to rule out pre-eclampsia, which would bring peace of mind to parents-to-be as well as cost-saving benefits to health services. Jane Brewin, the chief executive of Tommy’s, the charity behind the Parrot trial, said:

“For other women with raised blood pressure this ‘rule out’ test will give women peace of mind and enable doctors to treat their condition more appropriately.”

The reduction in diagnosis time brought about by placental growth factor testing is hugely important in determining the care pathway for mum and baby.

I have recently held stakeholder meetings in my role as chair of the APPG on premature and sick babies, one of which was with Professor Andrew Shennan, a professor of obstetrics at King’s College London, and Marcus Green, the chief executive of Action on Pre-Eclampsia. Professor Shennan truly is a leading expert on pre-eclampsia, with a working knowledge spanning decades of clinical practice. What really came across was the importance of individualised, tailored care pathways for patients with pre-eclampsia. A multi-disciplinary and systematic approach is required to ensure that each patient receives the appropriate care in order to reduce risk and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Placental growth factor testing will play a vital role in the future, allowing for much greater management of the condition. At an estimated cost of only £70 for a simple blood test, there is clearly a massive cost-benefit in making the testing widely available. Research published by Action on Pre-Eclampsia shows that the cost reduction per patient compared to standard clinical assessment could be almost £3,000.

The recent announcement that NHS England will be rolling out this testing is a hugely welcome step forward. It would be churlish of me not to place on the record my admiration of Her Majesty’s Government for taking that step forward. I understand that the Scottish Government are looking at adopting this north of the river, allowing for much greater management of the condition. At an estimated cost of only £70 for a simple blood test, there is clearly a massive cost-benefit in making the testing widely available. Research published by Action on Pre-Eclampsia shows that the cost reduction per patient compared to standard clinical assessment could be almost £3,000.

The other big takeaway from my meeting with Professor Shennan and Marcus Green was that there are training issues with some clinicians. To an extent there is a postcode lottery when it comes to the assessment and knowledge of risk factors for pre-eclampsia. Globally, the UK has the lowest level of maternal deaths caused by pre-eclampsia, but if we are ever to change the stubbornly high level of adverse outcomes for babies, educating clinicians must be prioritised.

The work being done at centres of excellence, such as the clinic at St Thomas’ Hospital just across the river, deserves to become the gold standard of care, regardless of location. It is really promising that there will be some replication of the approach taken at the unit, and in the next 12 months we will start to see more clinics set up in other places. That is welcome. That approach, building on the strong foundations of the preterm birth network, could see the UK become a true world leader in dealing with pre-eclampsia. We should all get behind that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, we know that the greatest burden of the condition is on low-income countries, and there is a role for us to play in improving outcomes around the world as well as at home. In order to do that we need to have a best-practice model, and it needs to be in place and operational across all our health services.

Maternal deaths as a result of pre-eclampsia are now rare in the UK, with a risk of just one in a million, as my hon. Friend explained. Although that is good news, regrettably there are hundreds of stillbirths in the UK each year as a result of the condition, and we have heard personal testimony of that today. There is more research to be done and more support that can be given. It might seem like a big ask of the Minister, but one small step that the Government can take now is to recognise World Pre-Eclampsia Day, which takes place on 22 May. I sincerely hope that she will join me in doing that.

I will wrap up by noting that there is clearly a great deal of expertise and willingness within the health services to improve outcomes, but that perhaps we need to see some sharper focus on this issue from the top, including from the House of Commons. I congratulate the Government on being so quick to act on making placental growth factor testing available throughout NHS England and hope that this is followed with greater resourcing to help predict and prevent adverse outcomes in future.

2 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I am sure that happened just earlier this week or maybe it was last week; maybe it is every week.

I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this important debate, just ahead of World Pre-Eclampsia Day on 22 May, and for her heartfelt, thoughtful and passionate speech. She is so brave, as has already been said, to do this. I know, and she knows, how hard it is to speak in a debate about something as personal and hurtful as the loss of a baby; nothing can ever be harder. I have the honour of being vice-chair, along with the hon. Lady, of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, which
we set up. All the Members who set up the group have had the awful experience of baby loss, which makes it such a powerful all-party group. We all take the work it does very seriously and have had some small achievements, thanks to the Government listening to the voices from the group.

Some changes are being made and implemented across the country because of it. I am proud that we are able to use our own tragic experiences of loss to campaign for better care, treatment and diagnosis for future parents, so that hopefully they do not ever have to go through anything like the experience that the hon. Lady has been through. Let us hope that the debate today, which, as the hon. Lady said, is the first debate of its kind, will lead to some future changes that will ensure that even fewer people will have to go through that experience. I was so very sorry to hear the details of the hon. Lady’s own personal experience of pre-eclampsia. I knew that was how she had lost her son, but not the detail. I thank her for sharing her story with us and I am sure that Kenneth would have been very proud of his mum.

I also thank the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Glasgow East (David Linden) for their excellent speeches, and I join everyone in saying how disappointing it is that there are not more Members attending this important debate. Perhaps the debate about acquired brain injury, taking place in the Chamber, has drawn a bigger crowd of available Members. Nevertheless, what we have lacked in quantity we have certainly made up for in quality; this has been an excellent debate so far, and we have yet to hear from the Minister.

As we have heard, pre-eclampsia affects around 6% of pregnancies; that means 1,000 babies a year are stillborn due to this awful condition. That is not good enough; it has to be and it can be reduced, as we have heard. The last triennial audit of maternal deaths in the UK reported that of the 22 deaths from pre-eclampsia, 14 were avoidable. Again, that number can be reduced. Because the symptoms of pre-eclampsia are so similar to the general symptoms of pregnancy, they are often missed and that can be fatal. That is why we are here today: to raise awareness and ensure change.

Women with diabetes, high blood pressure, kidney disease and a body mass index of over 35 are more likely to develop pre-eclampsia. Many instances of these conditions can be prevented with a healthy lifestyle. As the Shadow Minister for Public Health, I cannot miss any opportunity to mention prevention and the cuts to health services of £800 million between 2015 and 2021 under this Government. If public health budgets, which fund services such as obesity services, had not been slashed so vigorously by the Government, the number of women with these conditions would be reduced. Even so, where cases have not been prevented, these women should still be a priority for midwives and healthcare professionals, and offered the tests that exist for pre-eclampsia, and support throughout their pregnancy. The same goes for women with lupus, women over the age of 40, women expecting multiple babies and women who have had pre-eclampsia before.

If we target the women most at risk of developing pre-eclampsia, we can detect the condition early and prevent fatalities. Finding at-risk women is now much easier as tests are available, as we have heard, that can predict with nearly 100% accuracy which mothers are at risk of pre-eclampsia, but unfortunately the tests are not being used to their advantage. The test that is currently the only NICE-recommended clinically available diagnostic test for pre-eclampsia in the UK has seen uptake in only a handful of trusts so far, meaning that very few women in the UK have access to those life-saving tests. Will the Minister write to NHS trusts urging them to take up those tests, and advising them of the clinical guidance to do so?

Those tests can improve patient safety through accurate diagnosis upon the suspicion of pre-eclampsia, reduce the number of unnecessary admissions of suspected pre-eclampsia and reduce the direct costs to the system from the array of in-patient monitoring tests that are undertaken on the woman and her foetus. They will also relieve the stress and anxiety felt by expectant mothers that their symptoms are pre-eclampsia. We still do not know the root cause of pre-eclampsia. Does the Minister have any plans to fund research into the causes of pre-eclampsia so that more cases can be prevented each year?

Expectant mothers must also be made aware of pre-eclampsia and the signs and symptoms to look out for. I can remember being told about this terrible condition and every time my legs swelled or I had a urine test I would worry that I would get it. Maybe I was more informed or just a worrier, but I probably did not know enough about pre-eclampsia then. I might have been worrying needlessly; information is always a good thing. The knowledge will also fuel patient-led demand for testing and will, again, help to prevent deaths.

I hope the Minister will be able to assure us that the Department will look at this important issue further in the future, so that no more families have to go through the pain and suffering of losing a child to pre-eclampsia that we have heard about today.

2.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to see you here again, Mr Hollobone. It is an absolute privilege to respond to the debate brought by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I thank her for bringing it forward, and for her courage and honesty in the way she has approached the subject, which is clearly sensitive for her. Parliament is at its best when it hears people’s direct experience, so I am grateful for the way in which the hon. Lady has approached this.

I do not think the number of Members here reflects the importance of the subject, but, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said, the quality of the contributions we have heard, all of which have been linked to direct experience one way or another, has made it one of the most powerful debates we have had in this Chamber none the less. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran again.

This is the first time that the subject has been debated by Members of Parliament; while that should be shocking, in some respects it is not, because often things that affect many women are not adequately debated in this place. Thankfully, now there are more of us here, we can start to address that, and we will do so all the more often.
The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) talked about his wife's experience, how she knew her body and presented at the hospital, but was told to go home. I am afraid that happens far too much to women. We often feel diminished or that our voices are not heard. My challenge, in which I am sure all hon. Members will join me, is to ensure that all our health services just stop doing that to women, because it is not good enough. It has left us feeling diminished and not getting the treatment that we all deserve, so I thank him for amplifying that point.

It is always a pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who has a unique ability to bring to life a dad's perspective on these concerns and worries. As ever, it was a pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, who has also brought her own experience on these subjects in the past. I pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group that both she and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran are so passionate about and so active in.

In its short time, the all-party parliamentary group has been incredibly influential; I would struggle to find a more effective one. It is a pleasure for me to work with it and support its work, and I am expecting both hon. Ladies to come with their cap in hand for the next wave of things they want me to fund under that work. It is making a difference and giving support to families on something that has hitherto been taboo, so I am grateful to them for that.

What is important about this debate and about pre-eclampsia is that, as we have heard repeatedly, it is an avoidable illness in the sense that we know the risk factors. To be frank, there is no excuse for the incidence of pre-eclampsia in 21st-century Britain. We may have better performance than other countries—and so we should, because we are Great Britain—but we need to do better, to improve outcomes both for babies, and for mothers and fathers. I rise to the challenge here and will hope to answer some of the requests made in the course of this debate.

It is still the case that pre-eclampsia and HELLP syndrome are a leading cause of maternal mortality and pre-term births, claiming the lives of nearly 76,000 mothers and fathers. I hope to answer some of the requests made in the course of this debate.

It is still the case that pre-eclampsia and HELLP syndrome are a leading cause of maternal mortality and pre-term births, claiming the lives of nearly 76,000 mothers and 500,000 babies internationally each year. However, we know we can monitor the health of people in pregnancy, and we know the healthiest pregnancies are those that are planned, so it is important that we ensure that our policies encourage people to properly plan their pregnancies so that they can manage their health and, in particular, tackle things such as high body mass index and any other risk factors they may have.

In the UK, mild pre-eclampsia affects about 6% of pregnancies, and severe cases develop in about 2% of pregnancies. That is still quite high—dangerously high, considering the risk. According to the statistics for England, 14,352 pregnancies were coded for pre-eclampsia in 2017-18, which is 2.29% of all deliveries. That is 39 women in England diagnosed with pre-eclampsia every day. When we look at those types of figures, they bring home the fact that this condition is more common than the parliamentary attention given to it would suggest.

The prevalence of pre-eclampsia by maternal age or ethnic group is comparable to all pregnancies, but we know there is a risk of hypertensive disorders in women over 40, and those with a gap of 10 years since their last baby are at a higher risk. It is relatively easy to identify the al-risk group. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned that there is a higher prevalence among black women, who are five times more likely to die in pregnancy than white women, while Asian women are twice as likely to die. We must ensure that we tackle that, and we will take it forward through the race disparity audit, not least because there are generally other issues that lead to black and Asian women facing higher risk factors in pregnancy across the board.

I have been asked to see that the NHS adopts a life-course focus, rather than a pregnancy disease focus, when looking at this subject. That has come up in my discussions about women's health. The president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists tells me that the factors that might lead to a woman's mortality tend to surface during pregnancy, so it seems to me that we are not taking full advantage of pregnancy to have a look at women's health and risk factors and help them with long-term prevention of poor health. We really need to do better at that.

For example, there are indications that someone will suffer from chronic kidney disease or cardiovascular disease in later life. We must embrace that life-course approach to women's health. That is one of the things my women's health taskforce will take forward, to make sure that we are really not wasting the opportunity of pregnancy to look at the health of women.

Reference has been made to placental growth factor testing, which is being made available in England through the Accelerated Access Collaborative. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West challenged me, fairly, to ensure that trusts make use of that test. We need to take every opportunity to give a nudge and properly encourage all trusts to assess the risk factors in deciding whether to apply those tests.

Obviously, we will continue to have conversations with the Government in Scotland about our experiences. We would also be more than happy to support the efforts of Action on Pre-Eclampsia to raise awareness of pre-eclampsia and other hypertensive diseases in pregnancy during World Pre-Eclampsia Day.

I am pleased to report that there has been a significant decrease in maternal mortality from hypertensive disorders during pregnancy in recent years, but we cannot afford to be complacent. It is certainly true that when we look back at cases where mothers have died, too often, improvements in care could have made for a very different outcome. That reinforces the need to make sure that people are aware of this disease, which can be a killer.

I have been asked to prioritise research into stillbirths from pre-eclampsia. It was such research that supported the study that showed that placental growth factor tests can diagnose pre-eclampsia more accurately than current techniques. We are also funding the PHOENIX study at King's College London, which aims to determine whether delivery in women with pre-eclampsia between 34 and 36 weeks of gestation reduces maternal complications without short and long-term detriment to the infant, compared with delivery at 37 weeks. That study will conclude next year. We are increasing resources to support parents through the trauma of stillbirth; we continue to fund Sands to work with other baby loss...
characters and the royal colleges to produce the national bereavement care pathway and to reduce the variation in quality of bereavement care provided by the NHS.

We know that 1,000 babies die every year in the UK because of pre-eclampsia. Most die as a consequence of premature delivery, rather than the disease itself, because the only cure—if, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran says, we can call it that—is to deliver the baby. In terms of reducing those deaths, we need to ensure that we are managing that risk. Clearly, it is very important that we take full advantage of all antenatal appointments to do that, so that a pregnancy can be safely managed. We expect midwives to screen for pre-eclampsia at every appointment, by checking the woman’s blood pressure and urine. It is disappointing that MBRACE-UK found that those routine antenatal checks were not undertaken on most women who died of pre-eclampsia. Straight away, that is something that we really need to give the system a nudge on, to make sure that risks are not taken with the health of the mother or her baby.

On some of the other things that will help to manage this, as part of the long-term plan we will continue to work with midwives, mothers and families to implement continuity of carer, so that there is a longer-term relationship between the mother and health practitioners, who can then have trust and honest, empowered conversations. Women can often feel intimidated when dealing with practitioners who perhaps treat them in a less than humane way. When we have that personal relationship, we can have honest conversations, leading to better care and trust between the mother and her midwife, nurse or doctor.

Pre-eclampsia is very unpredictable, which makes it difficult to manage if the risk factors that add to prevalence are not there. It is clearly crucial that, if a woman’s condition deteriorates, a plan must be implemented quickly, with a multi-disciplinary approach to decision-making recommended. We expect every trust with a maternity and neonatal service to be part of the national maternal and neonatal health safety collaborative, which is driving forward practical improvements to make care safer in all maternity units by the end of 2019-20. I will make sure that there is specific action on monitoring that. NHS England is also supporting the establishment of maternal medicine networks, which will ensure that women with acute and chronic medical problems, including hypertension, have timely access to specialist advice at all stages of pregnancy, which, again, will help those discussions.

Members will be aware that, in November 2017, the Department extended the national maternity safety ambition to include reducing the national rate of pre-term births from 8% to 6%. The new Saving Babies’ Lives care bundle includes a focus on preventing pre-term birth, looking in particular at prediction, prevention and better preparation where pre-term birth is unavoidable. Every maternity service in the NHS is actively implementing elements of the Saving Babies’ Lives care bundle, and we are fully committed to implementing the recently launched version 2 of the bundle by March next year. Adherence to the care bundle is included in the planning guidance and incorporated into NHS standard contracts for 2019-20.

Placental growth-based blood tests clearly provide the ability to better diagnose pre-eclampsia and to manage risks. The tests have been selected as rapid uptake products by the Accelerated Access Collaborative, which works with commercial companies and clinical experts to make such products available much more widely. We will monitor that roll-out. That is an example of how we are trying to be much more fleet of foot when we identify these tests, products or medicines that can make a difference, which involves close working between NHS England and providers to deliver them. As set out in the long-term plan, the NHS will in the future introduce a new funding mandate for health tech products assessed as cost-saving by NICE. Clearly, preventive and testing measures are crucial to that.

I hope that Members welcome the progress made so far on this important issue. I am always happy to hear representations on where we can do better. Clearly, trying to make this country the safest place to have a baby, to make sure that we are doing everything we can to tackle stillbirths and to ensure that all women have safe and healthy pregnancies that deliver safe and healthy babies are priorities of the Government. I am very grateful for the constructive contributions of all Members. I am sure that this will not be the last time that we discuss this subject, even though it might be the first.

2.24 pm

Patricia Gibson: We clearly have a lot of work to do to raise awareness of this condition. The poor attendance in this Chamber is a clear testament to that, although I extend heartfelt thanks to my colleagues who have made the effort to come here today and speak.

As we have said—we cannot say this too often—1,000 babies across the UK die each year from pre-eclampsia-related complications. That demands our attention and requires our action. We know and have heard today that diagnosis and treatment are not what they could be and often not what they should be. If we do not talk about difficult issues, we are extremely unlikely to tackle them or, indeed, prioritise them. With pre-eclampsia affecting about—this is an estimate—6% of pregnancies in the UK, it affects every single constituency. I say this to all constituents who are watching the debate now or who may watch it later if they catch a bit of the news on social media about it: if this is an issue about which you are concerned, I urge you to contact your MP and ask them to raise it at every opportunity, because that is how change happens.

I welcome the Minister’s constructive response to the debate, and I look forward to continuing to work with her through the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, which deals with neonatal death. As she says, we know which women are likely to be at risk, so we need to ensure that the treatment of those women takes pre-eclampsia into account—that it is on the radar—so that we can better monitor them, and their babies’ lives can be saved as a result. It is also extremely important that women are listened to when they present to any medical professional. That cannot be stressed enough.

It is also important that the placental growth factor test is delivered, especially to those women we know are in at-risk groups. I am encouraged by the Minister, by mentioning the PHOENIX study, because I am hopeful that that will yield additional understanding that will improve treatment for pre-eclampsia.
[Patricia Gibson]

As the Minister said at the close of her remarks, this is the first debate on pre-eclampsia, but I am pretty confident that it will not be the last.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered pre-eclampsia.

2.27 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Written Statement

Monday 29 April 2019

JUSTICE

Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Ministry of Justice is today publishing the response to the consultation paper Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017: Implementing the Act. The response collates views from a variety of key stakeholders on the Department’s proposals for bringing the Act into force. The response will be available on www.gov.uk.

I have placed a copy of the response in the Libraries of both Houses.

It remains the Government’s intention to bring the Act into force in July 2019.

[HCWS1526]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) will today begin the statutory review of the pubs code (the code) and the pubs code adjudicator (PCA) through the launch of an invitation to all those with an interest to feed in their views and experiences of the operation of code and the effectiveness of the PCA.

Pubs are a vital part of communities across the country. The Government have been supporting them through freezing beer duty, cutting business rates for many pubs and supporting community pubs through changes to planning law and by funding Pub is the Hub’s pub diversification work.

The establishment of the pubs code was provided for by the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 (“the Act”) and is set out in the Pubs Code etc. Regulations 2016. The code governs the relationship between large pub owning businesses and their tied tenants, giving tenants certain rights, including the right at certain times to exercise a “market rent only” option, under which their rent is set at the market level and they are no longer required to buy products from their pub owning business.

The pubs code adjudicator (“PCA”) was established by the Act and is appointed by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The role of the PCA includes giving advice and guidance; the investigation of non-compliance with the code; where non-compliance is found, requiring publication of information, imposing financial penalties or making enforceable recommendations; and arbitrating disputes under the code.

Section 46 of the Act requires the Secretary of State to review periodically the operation of the pubs code and section 65 of the Act requires the Secretary of State to review periodically the adjudicator’s performance. The review will look at the period from the establishment of the code and the PCA to 31 March 2019.

The invitation to submit comments and evidence will run for 12 weeks and can be accessed through gov.uk (https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pubs-code-and-pubs-code-adjudicator-statutory-review).

Stakeholders have until 22 July 2019 to respond. Following this, BEIS will analyse the responses and other evidence as set out in the terms of reference. A report on the findings of the review will then be published as soon as practicable and laid before Parliament by the Secretary of State.

The terms of reference for the pubs code and PCA reviews will today be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1529]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Today the Government have announced their intention to increase the financial support for beneficiaries of the infected blood support scheme in England, administered by the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA).

This follows a meeting on 21 January 2019 between myself, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the infected blood inquiry secretariat and affected beneficiaries where I committed to looking at where further improvements might be made to the support provided by the existing infected blood scheme.

In this announcement, we have set out our plans for a major uplift in the financial support available to infected and affected beneficiaries of the infected blood support scheme in England. The current annual cost of the scheme is estimated at £46.3 million per annum and we expect this will increase to over £75 million to provide for these uplifted payments.

The level of support provided to infected beneficiaries will increase. In addition, the upper threshold level of household income currently used to means-test support provided for the bereaved will also be substantially raised allowing more bereaved beneficiaries to be eligible for additional support from the scheme.

All beneficiaries will be sent a letter by NHSBSA this week setting out the details of the changes and the impact they will have on them. This detailed payment information will also be made available on NHSBSA’s website. All new payments will be backdated to 1 April 2019.

I have also announced my intention to reach out to the devolved administrations to look at how we might provide greater parity of support across the United Kingdom. I will update hon. Members on these conversations in due course.

Today’s announcement reconfirms the Government’s commitment to providing those affected by the infected blood tragedy of the 1970s and 1980s with a fair and transparent support scheme, one which focuses on their welfare and long-term independence.

It also reaffirms the Prime Minister’s support for the infected blood inquiry, which she ordered in 2017, and which specifically asked for the support given to those affected by infected blood be looked at again. The Government will continue to listen to and co-operate fully with the inquiry.
The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Yesterday, 30 April 2019, Four Seasons healthcare group announced that they have appointed Richard Fleming, Mark Firmin and Richard Beard (Alvarez and Marsal) as administrators to Elli Investments Limited (EIL Guernsey) and Elli Finance (UK) Plc (EFUk). These two companies between them hold £625 million of the company’s debt. It has also announced the launch of an independent sales process of the operational parts of the group, Four Seasons healthcare, Brighterkind and the Huntercombe group, which will continue to deliver care as normal.

The group has been going through financial restructuring negotiations with its main creditor H2 Capital Partners since December 2017 with a standstill agreement on its interest payments in place. This agreement has been extended several times, with the latest of these having expired at 23:59 on 29 April. The planned sale of the operating businesses, through an independent, court appointed administrator, will now bring greater certainty to those in care, their families and the 22,000 people employed by the company.

I would like to update the House on the steps being taken to assure people with care and support needs currently being met by the Four Seasons healthcare group that they should not see a gap in their care service—no matter how their care is funded.

I have met with the company and the administrator to seek assurance that they are putting the continuity of care at the forefront of this process and that there will be no sudden care home closures. I am pleased to confirm that they have provided both me and the Care Quality Commission with this reassurance.

In the event that a buyer is not found for any of the care homes, the company has undertaken to manage any future plans around the transition of care with great sensitivity, taking time to ensure that residents are supported to find a new home.

In 2014, the law was changed giving the CQC a new responsibility to monitor the financial sustainability of the largest and most-difficult-to-replace care providers across the country. That means the CQC has a legal duty to notify local authorities if it considers there to be a credible risk of service disruption (stage 6 notification) as a result of business failure so that they have more time to prepare their plans to protect individuals. The CQC is clear that there is no current risk of service disruption and is not issuing a stage 6 notification to local authorities at this time.

The Care Act 2014 also places duties on local authorities to intervene to protect individuals where their care provider is no longer able to carry on because of business failure. There should never be a gap in the care that an individual receives. Local authorities have a statutory duty under section 48(2) of the Care Act to meet the needs of individuals temporarily if their care provider is no longer able to carry on. Business failure is a normal part of a functioning market and local authorities have appropriate plans in place to minimise disruption of services.

The CQC and my Department are closely monitoring the situation. They are also working closely with the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, NHS England and Four Seasons healthcare group to ensure that individuals’ care and support needs continue to be met.

Written Statements Written Statements

Wednesday 1 May 2019

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health and Social Care Providers

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government’s building safety programme has focused primarily on immediate interim mitigation actions and permanent replacement of unsafe aluminium composite material (ACM) panels on high-rise buildings because of the acute risks posed by such panels.

In addition, we have banned the use of combustible materials in the exterior walls of all new residential buildings over 18 metres in height and certain other new high-rise buildings. We have acted on the advice of the Government’s independent expert advisory panel (IEAP) and issued advice to building owners about the steps they should take to ensure the safety of their existing buildings with other external wall systems that do not incorporate ACM, reiterating that the clearest way to ensure safety is to remove any unsafe materials. This advice was first issued in December 2017 and updated in December 2018 in the Department’s advice note 14: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-building-safety-programme#advice-notes

The IEAP also advised the Department to establish a research project to test and improve the evidence available on the behaviour of a range of non-ACM materials used in cladding systems when subjected to fire. The Building Research Establishment (BRE), has been commissioned to undertake this project.

The materials to be tested are: copper and zinc composite materials; aluminium honeycomb panels; high-pressure laminate panels; brick slips; and reconstituted stone.

Tests will be carried out over the coming weeks and are expected to conclude in early summer.

A number of parameters characterising the behaviours of materials in a fire will be considered. The aim of the tests is to provide comparative data to enable an assessment of relative risks. There is no simple pass or fail criterion for each test. A copy of the methodology has been put in the Library of the House.

A full picture of the outcomes of the tests can only be provided following a detailed analysis of all the test data. We expect this analysis to be completed in the summer and we will publish the conclusions of the programme thereafter.
If any tests suggest an immediate public safety concern, the Government will consult the IEAP urgently, consider appropriate action, and inform the House and public accordingly.

In the meantime, building owners should follow the advice set out in advice note 14. [HCWS1533]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Executive

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): This statement is issued in accordance with section 4 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 (EFEF Act). Section 4 of the Act requires that I, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, report on a quarterly basis on guidance issued under that section of the Act. It also required me to report on how I plan to address the impact of the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers on human rights obligations within three months of the day the Act was passed.

The Act received Royal Assent on 1 November 2018. Following careful consideration of the sensitive issues section 4 deals with, and in consultation with the Northern Ireland civil service, guidance under section 4 was published on 17 December 2018.

The first report required under section 4 was published as a written ministerial statement on 30 January 2019. It is again worth reiterating that abortion and same-sex marriage are devolved matters in Northern Ireland, and neither the EFEF Act nor the section 4 guidance change Northern Ireland’s law in relation to these issues or enable the law to be changed by way of guidance issued in my capacity as Secretary of State.

I appeared before the Women and Equalities Committee on 27 February 2019 to provide evidence as part of its enquiry into abortion law in Northern Ireland. I welcome the Committee’s work on this important issue and the report it published on 25 April 2019. The Government will carefully consider the Committee’s report and recommendations and respond in due course.

As before, I have consulted the head of the Northern Ireland civil service in the preparation of this report. He has advised that the Northern Ireland Departments continue to note the guidance and comply with their legal obligations when exercising any relevant functions in relation to abortion and same-sex marriage. He has also confirmed that relevant Departments are also considering the Women and Equalities Committee’s report.

I continue to believe 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. I would encourage a restored Executive to progress legislation on these issues as a matter of priority.

Restoring the Executive remains my absolute priority. As I announced on Friday 26 April 2019, the Government have agreed, together with the Irish Government, to establish a new process of political talks, involving all the main political parties in Northern Ireland, in accordance with the three-stranded approach. The aim of these talks, commencing on 7 May 2019, is to quickly re-establish the democratic institutions of the Belfast agreement so that they can effectively serve all of the people for the future. I am firmly of the view that the people of Northern Ireland need their elected representatives back in government to take important decisions on the issues that matter most to them.

As I have previously stated, I will keep the Government’s position on abortion and same-sex marriage under review in the light of the UK Government’s legal obligations, and in the light of any relevant emerging legal judgments, as appropriate. [HCWS1530]

TRANSPORT

Heathrow Expansion

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government welcome today’s judgments from the High Court in the judicial review of the airports national policy statement. Of 26 grounds, all were dismissed with 21 of the 26 not even held to be arguable. The positive outcome confirms my belief that Government undertook a robust process in coming to their decision to support a new northwest runway at Heathrow airport by 2030. This was one of the largest public law challenges of all time and I am pleased that the hard work of the independent Airports Commission and the Department has been shown in good light.

In designating the airports national policy statement, this Government demonstrated their willingness to take difficult decisions, resolving an issue with which successive administrations had grappled for decades.

Heathrow expansion is more important than ever as we plan to exit the EU. Connectivity to our only aviation hub airport is vital to productivity, and expansion is critical if global Britain is to attract inward investment and increase trade with new and fast growing overseas markets. It would better connect the UK to the rest of the world with an extra 16 million long-haul seats available by 2040. Heathrow expansion is a decision that benefits communities up and down the country—as well as the tens of thousands of local jobs it would create, expansion is expected to increase the number of domestic routes from our hub airport to 14; we have already seen the arrival of direct flights to Newquay, allowing easy access to the UK’s only hub airport from the southwest.

In addition to new international and domestic routes, we would expect there to be increased competition on existing routes, giving greater choice to passengers. Heathrow Airport Limited has also made good progress on its logistics hub proposals—these aim to leave a lasting skills legacy across the UK. Today’s decisions by the Court are another step towards realising these benefits.

This Government recognise that airport expansion cannot be at any cost. Expansion at Heathrow would only take place in compliance with air quality legal limits. For those communities impacted by the scheme, a world class package of mitigations would be provided...
and, despite the third runway, a future Heathrow would be quieter than it was in 2013 as new, quieter, planes come online and robust noise mitigations are rolled out. To get people to and from the expanded airport, Heathrow must ensure more people travel by public transport—supported by the expected development of western and southern rail links.

I want to address climate change where the UK continues to lead internationally. While international aviation emissions currently represent less than 2% of total global emissions, we recognise the challenge that decarbonisation of aviation represents. International aviation emissions are currently excluded from UK carbon budgets—this is consistent with the Paris agreement, which looks to the International Civil Aviation Organisation to provide leadership. The UK supports this approach and is continuing to lead negotiations on this issue. In coming to our decision to support expansion at Heathrow, the Airports Commission and the Department concluded that expansion is possible within the UK’s current climate change obligations and the Committee on Climate Change’s recommended limit for aviation emissions. We are clear that expansion would only take place if it would not materially impact the ability of Government to meet their carbon reduction targets now and in the future.

The Government are currently consulting on their aviation strategy Green Paper, which creates a plan for sustainable growth that benefits the whole of the UK to 2050 and beyond. In developing the strategy, we will carefully consider the Committee on Climate Change’s forthcoming advice on the implications of the Paris agreement for the UK’s long-term emissions reduction targets.

**Next steps**

Scarce taxpayers’ resources—on all sides—would be better spent elsewhere. If the Court grants permission for any appeals, we will seek to have them dealt with as quickly as possible. However, I urge all parties, particularly local authorities and community groups affected by the proposals, to move forward and engage closely with the planning process. As part of this, Heathrow Airport Limited has said it will undertake a consultation on its scheme masterplan in June. This will provide an opportunity for interested parties to give their views on the emerging scheme design. Heathrow would then apply for development consent which would be considered by the planning inspectorate, before a recommendation is made to Government.

Outside of the planning process, the Civil Aviation Authority will continue to work with industry and Heathrow to ensure expansion can be delivered in a timely, financeable and affordable manner that is in the best interests of the consumer.

This Government have taken the right decision, endorsed by a large majority of MPs, which had been ducked by other Governments for decades. The expansion of Heathrow is vital to our international connectivity and shows confidence in the future prosperity of global Britain. The Court’s decision confirms that the right process was followed throughout. We could not be more pleased with the outcome which will benefit people and businesses the length and breadth of the UK for decades to come.

[HCWS1531]
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Luxembourg on 15 April.

The main item on the agenda was the reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP) post-2020, with a focus on the proposed new green architecture. Ministers highlighted their willingness to commit to higher levels of overall ambition such as spending 30% of pillar 2 funding on climate change actions, and endorsed the new policy design. However, some member states also pressed for large chunks of the Commission’s proposals to be optional, including some of the Commission’s eco-schemes.

This was followed by a ministerial lunch debate which focused on the impact of large carnivores and other species on agriculture. The Commission’s position that 100% state aid was permissible to compensate for attacks on livestock did not satisfy several member states, who wanted greater latitude for farmers to shoot wolves and other predators.

Council reconvened with an exchange of views on the task force in rural Africa, with the final report proposing a new alliance between the EU and Africa. I intervened on the item, highlighting the importance of developing countries in the global food supply and giving examples from UK projects that increase smallholder inclusion in the value chain and empower women economically.

Commissioner Hogan also provided an update on the market situation, describing a stable and positive picture overall with concerns in sugar, apples and pears, and olive oil.

A number of other items were discussed under “any other business”:

The Netherlands informed Council about EU action against deforestation and forest degradation. I intervened, stressing our support for the proposal and encouraged the Commission to prepare an ambitious communication to step up action against deforestation.

Slovakia presented its joint declaration with the Czech Republic and Poland on the renewable energy directive post-2020.

The presidency informed the Council of the outcome of the research and agriculture conference held in Bucharest on 5 April.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 8 April 2019

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and I attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 8 April. It was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.

Current affairs

The High Representative and Foreign Ministers had an exchange of views on the most pressing issues on the international agenda. In particular, they expressed their concern over developments in Libya. They urged all parties to implement immediately a humanitarian truce, refrain from any further military escalation and return to the negotiations. They reiterated their full support for the efforts of the UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé in working towards peace and stability in Libya.

Foreign Ministers also referred to the implementation of the penal code order in Brunei and expressed their strong opposition to cruel and degrading punishments, prohibited by the convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, which was signed by Brunei in 2015.

In relation to the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, the Council reiterated the EU’s strong opposition to the extraterritorial application of unilateral restrictive measures, which it considered contrary to international law.

Afghanistan

Ministers discussed the situation in Afghanistan. They focused on how the EU could best contribute to current peace efforts. The High Representative debriefed Ministers on her visits to Islamabad on 25 March and Kabul on 26 March.

Eastern partnership

Ministers discussed the eastern partnership (EaP) in view of the EaP ministerial meeting (13 May) and the high-level event (14 May) to mark the EaP’s 10th anniversary. Ministers highlighted the importance of the partnership, which is based on shared values and principles, and an approach combining inclusivity and differentiation.

Ministers welcomed the progress achieved with eastern partnership countries within the “20 deliverable for 2020” framework, and in particular the tangible and concrete results in trade, people-to-people contact, transport, connectivity, infrastructure and economic reform. They agreed that implementation of reforms in sectors such as governance, anticorruption and the judiciary require additional efforts.

Informal lunch on Venezuela

Foreign Ministers exchanged views on Venezuela. They discussed the outcome of the second meeting of the international contact group (ICG) on 28 March in Quito. They agreed to step up work on the two tracks of the ICG: facilitating humanitarian access, and creating the conditions for free, fair, transparent presidential elections.

Council conclusions

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council adopted conclusions on the Afghanistan’s peace process.

The Council endorsed the framework on counter-terrorism, developed jointly by the UN and the EU. The framework identifies areas for UN-EU co-operation and priorities until 2020.
The Council endorsed the 2018 progress report on the EU strategy against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The Council concluded the agreement establishing the EU-Latin America and the Caribbean international foundation.

The Council adopted conclusions on the European Court of Auditors’ special report No 15/2018 entitled “Strengthening the capacity of the internal security forces in Niger and Mali: only limited and slow progress”.

The Council authorised the signature of the EU-Pakistan strategic engagement plan on behalf of the EU.

The Council endorsed the continuation of the EU’s action in support of the UN verification and inspection mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM), from 1 April 2019 to 30 September 2019. The EU is contributing €4.9 million to UNVIM for one year.

The Council authorised the opening of negotiations with Vietnam for an agreement to establish a framework for its participation in EU crisis management operations.

The Council adopted conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action (ST 7749/19).

The Council endorsed the 2018 progress report on the EU strategy against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The Council concluded the agreement establishing the EU-Latin America and the Caribbean international foundation. The Council adopted conclusions on the European Court of Auditors’ special report No 15/2018 entitled “Strengthening the capacity of the internal security forces in Niger and Mali: only limited and slow progress”. The Council authorised the signature of the EU-Pakistan strategic engagement plan on behalf of the EU. The Council endorsed the continuation of the EU’s action in support of the UN verification and inspection mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM), from 1 April 2019 to 30 September 2019. The EU is contributing €4.9 million to UNVIM for one year. The Council authorised the opening of negotiations with Vietnam for an agreement to establish a framework for its participation in EU crisis management operations. The Council adopted conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action (ST 7749/19).

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Last year, we published a public consultation on the initial findings of a review of the legislation, guidance and practice surrounding police driving in England, Wales and Scotland. As we said last May, this Government are determined to get ahead of and tackle emerging threats like motorcycle-related crimes, including those involving mopeds and scooters. People must be able to go about their daily lives without fear of harassment or attack and criminals must not think they can get away with a crime by riding or driving in a certain way or on a certain type of vehicle.

Since this work commenced, we have already seen an impact on offending behaviour through operational responses, such as ensuring that merely removing a crash helmet will not result in the police discontinuing a pursuit. The Government will continue to work closely with the police in England, Wales and Scotland, the College of Policing and other organisations to clarify driver training standards, including the requirements for refresher training.

I am grateful to the 383 individuals and organisations that responded to the consultation, including 222 police officers, forces and other related organisations. We will be publishing a full response later today on gov.uk. I am pleased to confirm that the overwhelming majority of responses were supportive of the proposals set out in the consultation, either in full or in principle. In addition, during and since the consultation period, we have also continued to work with the Independent Office for Police Conduct, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Police Federation, the National Police Chiefs Council and others in order to refine our proposals.

The Government will seek to introduce a new test to assess the standard of driving of a police officer when parliamentary time allows. This new test will compare the standard of driving against that of a careful, competent and suitably trained police driver in the same role rather than use the existing test which compares driving against a standard qualified driver who would not normally be involved in police action.

As a result of the responses to the consultation and the related work, the Government have also decided to examine how we can best:

Make clear that police officers should not be regarded as being accountable for the driving of a suspected criminal who is attempting to avoid arrest by driving in a dangerous manner, providing the pursuit is justified and proportionate.

Review the various emergency service exemptions to traffic law to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

We have been clear from the beginning of this review that we must ensure that the outcome of these changes enables the police to do their job effectively and keep us safe while ensuring that we continue to keep our roads among the safest in the world. I believe that the action we intend to take will do just that, while giving police officers greater confidence that they will be appropriately protected by the law if they drive in accordance with their training with a view to protecting the public.

We would like to develop a uniform approach across Great Britain and will engage with the devolved Administrations in recognition of devolved interests.
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business: Companies Register

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): One of the key foundations of our modern industrial strategy is delivering a strong, transparent and attractive business environment in the UK. The strength of the UK’s business environment is founded on our fair and open regulatory frameworks. The companies register is the base on which that strength is built.

While the overwhelming majority of UK corporates operate wholly legitimately, concerns have been expressed about the misuse of UK corporate entities, the filing of false information on the companies register held at Companies House and the use of innocent people’s information on the register to commit fraud and other acts of harm.

In the last three years there have been almost 10,000 complaints to Companies House from people concerned about their personal details, with worries including fraud and misuse of personal details topping the list.

We are therefore seeking views on a series of reforms to limit the risks of misuse. These include measures to: provide greater certainty over the identity of those shown as owning, running or controlling companies, including identity verification; improve the accuracy and usability of data on the register; protect personal information; ensure compliance and take action against offenders; and deter abuse of UK-registered corporate entities. We are committed to minimising burdens on law abiding businesses, especially the smallest. The consultation will therefore look at the best way to minimise burdens on businesses.

These reforms build on our global reputation as a trusted and welcoming place to do business and a leading exponent of greater corporate transparency.

The UK has one of the highest ratings for cracking down on anonymous companies, and the Government’s proposed measures build on the Britain’s world-leading anti-corruption activity. In 2016, the UK became the first country in the G20 to introduce a public register of company ownership, while new protections against identity fraud for company directors were introduced in 2018.

These measures will boost the reputation of the UK’s business environment, ensuring reliability of the UK’s company register. Knowing that a company’s information is accurate and transparent is a fundamental part of a leading business environment—giving entrepreneurs and businesses the confidence they need to do business in the UK.

I will place a copy of the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1540]
LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Restoration and Renewal

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):
Today, the Government publishes its response to the Joint Committee's report on the draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill.

The Joint Committee published its report on 21 March 2019. This report followed careful consideration by the Committee, taking evidence from a range of interested experts and stakeholders. The report set out a series of helpful recommendations on the content of the Bill and on wider issues related to Restoration and Renewal, including matters for the Shadow Sponsor Body to consider.

The Joint Committee was appointed by the House of Commons on 26 November 2018 and the House of Lords on 29 November 2018. It scrutinised the draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill ("the Bill") by considering written and oral evidence from a range of contributors, including the Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Andrea Leadsom MP and the Leader of the House of Lords, the right hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park.

The Government welcomes the Committee's report and considered "an evidence-based approach" the Chair and members of the Committee have taken in scrutinising the Bill. The support of the Committee and its endorsement of the overarching aim of the draft Bill is very important in progressing this important and pressing work. The Government are committed to establish in statute the necessary governance arrangements to oversee the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster, and in doing so, ensuring it provides value for money for the taxpayer.

The Government are committed to introducing the Bill as soon as possible. We recognise that this is a significant and urgent task given the current state of disrepair of the Palace. The recent incidents in the Palace of Westminster, including masonry falling from the building have further highlighted the urgency of the works to restore and renew the Palace of Westminster. The tragic fire at Notre Dame has also served as a reminder of the risks to this historic and iconic building.

[HCWS1537]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Security Arrangements

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): This is a summary of the main findings from the report by His Honour Brian Barker QC, the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements in Northern Ireland, covering the period from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018. His Honour Brian Barker concludes:

Throughout the reporting period I have been briefed periodically on the state of threat in Northern Ireland. I received presentations from PSNI and MI5 on the practical effect of their co-operation and mutual reliance. My visits to PSNI establishments and to MI5 left an impression of deep commitment and professionalism, further demonstrated by their openness and willingness to respond to all aspects of my enquiries. Strong cross-border links continue with An Garda Síochána.

The context in which national security activities are performed in Northern Ireland remains challenging and members of the security forces continue to require vigilance in relation to their personal security. Dissident republicans continue to express political conviction to justify violence and law breaking, while loyalist paramilitaries maintain control in areas by self-justified intimidation and administration of violence. As in recent years there have been successes and considerable effort devoted to containing and disrupting dissident groups. Nevertheless, planning and targeting continues and attacks occur.

The number of security related incidents for this reporting period are broadly similar to my previous report; in 2017 shooting incidents rose from 49 to 58, whilst the number of security related deaths decreased from 6 to 2. There were 30 bombing incidents, and casualties from paramilitary style assaults (excluding fatalities) increased from 65 to 74; casualties from paramilitary style shootings (excluding fatalities) also increased from 20 to 27. The number of persons arrested and charged under s.41 of the Terrorism Act decreased from 18 to 13.

This period I have focused on Covert Human Intelligence Sources [CHIS]. There is excellent co-operation between MI5 and PSNI on CHIS operations, including frequent meetings between PSNI and MI5 at a senior level to discuss CHIS policy and operations. In accordance with the St. Andrews principles, PSNI manage the majority of national security CHIS. There is a systematic review procedure for CHIS.

The political situation is difficult and complex and throughout this reporting period Northern Ireland was without a functioning Executive and Assembly, despite a number of attempts at negotiations between parties; concern about the effect of the political situation was a recurring theme in many of my stakeholder engagements.

I met a range of stakeholders in this reporting period, including the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB), the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI), the Attorney General (AG) and the Committee on Administration of Justice (CAJ). NIPB highlighted the effect of not being able to fully operate, due to the lack of a functioning Executive or Assembly, and raised concerns that crucial decisions, such as an inability to retain their independent Human Rights Advisor, could lead to a diminution of trust in their work.

PONI outlined the challenge of balancing a large volume of troubles-era complaints against a limit to the resources available to investigate.

The Committee on Administration of Justice (CAJ) raised concerns about the effect of the lack of an NI Executive and the potential impact of EU Exit. They reported that their relationship with PSNI was good and improving. CAJ proposed a framework where the operational boundaries of MI5 and PSNI responsibilities relating to NIRT, paramilitarism and extreme right activity was published. CAJ believe this would have an international benefit and would give accountability and public acceptability.
A meeting with the Attorney General (AG), John Larkin QC, was productive. Within the scope of his remit, the AG explained his hope for improvement to certain elements of the criminal justice system, such as more informative defence statements and better monitoring of entrapment accusations and subsequent requests for disclosure.

Overall, I continue to be impressed with the standards and commitment of the senior members of MI5 and the PSNI and understand the frustration all stakeholders experience due to the lack of a functioning Executive.

I have measured performance in this reporting period against the five key principles identified in relation to national security in Annex E to the St Andrews agreement of October 2006. My conclusions are set out in the attachment table.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-05-07/HCWS1538/
Written Statements

Wednesday 8 May 2019

HOME DEPARTMENT

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Following a review of the existing funding arrangements, I have decided to make more funding available to local authorities supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).

The review involved gathering detailed information and feedback from across the local government sector, and I am grateful to all those who contributed to producing a robust evidence base. This included over 50 upper tier or unitary local authorities, NGOs, the Local Government Association (LGA), Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) and regional Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs).

After considering the evidence, I have decided that the rates currently paid at £71, £91 and £95 should be uplifted to £114 per UASC per night. This will apply to care provided from 1 April 2019 onwards.

Home Office funding for local authorities supporting UASC provides a contribution to their costs. The decision to increase these rates reflects the incredibly valuable work local authorities undertake with vulnerable UASC, and the Home Office commitment to supporting this.

[HCWS1542]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

IBRD Loan to Jordan: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): I have today laid a departmental minute setting out DFID’s intention to guarantee a portion of a forthcoming development policy loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)-arm of the World Bank to Jordan.

This would create a contingent liability of the US dollar equivalent of £332 million (based on current interest and exchange rates), in respect of the World Bank Group. There remain strong incentives for Jordan to avoid entering into arrears as doing so would lead to the IBRD not agreeing any new lending, and not providing any lending agreed under existing loans.

In the event that a default did occur, and the guarantee is called, the UK would still provide compensation to the World Bank, in proportion to the UK’s guaranteed share of the overall IBRD loan. If this liability is called, provision for any DFID payment would be sought through the normal procedure.

[HCWS1543]

Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Today, the Government publish the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill, which seeks to establish the statutory bodies that will be responsible for the restoration and renewal works within the parliamentary estate, giving effect to the resolutions passed by Parliament earlier last year. In addition to Parliament having expressed its view in those resolutions, it will also be given an opportunity to vote on the proposed design, cost and timing of the substantive building works relating to the Palace of Westminster. In developing the Bill, the Government have worked closely with the House authorities.

The tragic fire at Notre Dame has served as a reminder of the risks to this historic and iconic building. The recent incidents in the Palace of Westminster, including fulling masonry, have further highlighted the urgency of the works to restore and renew the Palace of Westminster.

The Restoration and Renewal Bill was published in draft in October 2018 and has been subject to pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee. Its report was published in March 2019 and we have carefully considered the responses of the Joint Committee. The Government welcomed the Committee’s report and the considered, evidence-based approach the Chair and Members of the Committee have taken in scrutinising the Bill, and accepted many of its recommendations in full. The support of the Committee and its endorsement of the overarching aim of the Bill is integral in progressing this important and pressing work.

The Bill will establish the governance structure within which those bodies will operate. The bodies will have the capacity and capability to make strategic decisions on the restoration and renewal programme, so that the Palace of Westminster can be secured as the UK Parliament for future generations.

The Bill establishes a parliamentary works sponsor body which will have overall responsibility for the programme and act as a single client on behalf of both Houses. It will also form a Delivery Authority as a company limited by guarantee. The Delivery Authority will formulate proposals in relation to the restoration works, and ensure their operational delivery. The bodies will be independent and able to operate effectively in the commercial sphere, bringing the expertise and capability needed for a project of this scale. This two-tier approach was used to successfully deliver the London Olympics.

The Bill also establishes a parliamentary works estimates commission which will lay the Sponsor Body’s estimates before Parliament, and play a role in reviewing the Sponsor Body’s expenditure.

The Government’s role is to ensure we deliver the best possible value for taxpayers’ money, and the measures in the Bill reflect our determination to ensure Parliament keeps the total bill down, and the restoration runs to time and on budget. The Bill provides that the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority must have regard to value for money when exercising their functions throughout the Programme. The Treasury will be able to review and comment on the annual estimates for the funding of the
programme, and the National Audit Office will be able to undertake audits and value-for-money reviews. Furthermore, the estimates commission will have the power to review, comment on, and in certain circumstances reject those annual estimates.

It is important that the views of parliamentarians on the programme are taken into account. The Sponsor Body will have a majority of parliamentarians on its board, alongside external expertise. Parliamentarians will be fully consulted on the strategic direction of the programme. The Sponsor Body will be required to return to Parliament for approval to make any significant changes to the approved proposals in respect of the Palace. Parliament will also be given an opportunity to vote on the annual expenditure of the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority through the estimates process.

[HCWS1544]
Written Statements

Thursday 9 May 2019

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF
LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE

Common Travel Area

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Recognising the deep and enduring relationship between our two countries, the UK Government and the Government of Ireland yesterday entered into a memorandum of understanding reaffirming our joint commitment to the common travel area (CTA), and to maintaining the associated rights and privileges of British and Irish citizens under this longstanding reciprocal arrangement.

The UK has consistently reiterated its commitment to maintaining the CTA. Following on from guidance published in February, this Memorandum of Understanding reaffirms the support of the UK Government for the principles of the CTA, and the rights it affords British and Irish citizens when in the other's state.

The CTA, involving the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, and Ireland, facilitates the ability of British and Irish citizens to move freely within it. Flowing from this right to move freely are associated reciprocal rights and privileges that are enjoyed daily by British citizens in Ireland, and Irish citizens in the UK. These include access to employment, healthcare, all levels of education, and social benefits on the same basis as citizens of the other state, as well as the right to vote in local and national parliamentary elections.

Neither Irish citizens in the UK nor British citizens in Ireland are required to take any action to protect their status and rights associated with the CTA. Both Governments are committed to undertake all the work necessary, including through legislative provision, to ensure that the agreed CTA rights and privileges are protected.

TREASURY

Contingent Liability Notification

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I can today confirm that I have laid a Treasury Minute, informing the House of the contingent liability that HM Treasury has assumed in relation to the transfer of sponsorship of the Bradford & Bingley plc (B&B) employer defined benefit pension scheme and the NRAM employer defined benefit pension scheme (the "Schemes") from B&B and NRAM, respectively, to UK Asset Resolution Limited (UKAR).

UKAR and the trustees of each scheme (the “Trustees”) have agreed that the sponsorship of both Schemes should be transferred from B&B and NRAM to UKAR.

The contingent liability takes the form of a credit support deed (a “CSD”), entered into by HM Treasury and UKAR in respect of each of the Schemes, which will provide comfort to the Trustees that, in the event UKAR is unable to meet any payment obligation in respect of one or more of the Schemes, HM Treasury will provide UKAR with sufficient funds to meet such payment obligation. The remote maximum contingent liability possible under the CSDs together is estimated at £1.4 billion, based on the current mortality assumptions and discounted defined benefit obligations of the Schemes. This would only crystallise in the highly remote circumstances where the value of assets in both Schemes fell to zero and HM Treasury became liable for all liabilities under each scheme. Given that the majority of assets in the Schemes are held in gilts and the expectation that each scheme will be in surplus at the time of transfer, this scenario is considered highly unlikely.

As the Schemes will be in surplus at the time of transfer, UKAR is not expected to make any additional payments to either scheme until at least the next triennial valuations in three years’ time. In the light of this and the fact that UKAR will be funded via the usual supply procedure, HM Treasury considers it unlikely that the CSD will be called upon.

The CSD will remain in place for as long as UKAR remains the sponsor of the Schemes. It should be noted that HM Treasury, as the ultimate owner of B&B and NRAM, already has indirect exposure to this risk. An existing guarantee given by HM Treasury to the B&B pension scheme trustees will remain in place following the transfer of the B&B pension scheme to UKAR.

The transfer of sponsorship will not affect members' benefits, there will be no impact on members' accrued rights, and the relevant trustee board of each Scheme will remain unchanged following the transfer of sponsorship to UKAR.

I will update the House of any further changes as necessary.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) will take place in Brussels on 13 May. It will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini.

There will be an Eastern Partnership (EaP) ministerial before the FAC. The FAC will discuss current affairs, Libya and Sahel.

Eastern Partnership ministerial

Ministers will discuss the partnership's achievements, the need for further progress on reforms and the partnership's future direction post 2020. The ministerial forms part of a sequence of events to mark the partnership's
10-year anniversary, including an anniversary statement and the EaP Heads of State and Government high level conference, hosted by Presidents Tusk, Juncker, and Tajani on 14 May.

Current affairs

We expect HRVP Mogherini to update Ministers on recent developments in Venezuela, including the 7 May international contact group meeting. She may also provide an update on western Balkans, Sudan and the US decision not to renew the waiver of title III of the Helms-Burton Act.

Libya

Ministers will discuss the ongoing security situation in Libya, following Libyan national army (LNA) advances on Tripoli. The UK is deeply concerned by reports that the recent violence has caused the displacement of thousands of people, and blocked emergency aid to casualties, including civilians. The UK will underline that there is no military solution to Libya’s challenges.

Sahel

Ministers will discuss the current situation in the Sahel. The Council will seek to agree conclusions highlighting the EU’s commitment to working with the countries of the region to meet the security, development and humanitarian challenges they are facing.

Council conclusions

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions on Sahel and on the communication on relations between the EU and LAC (Latin America and Caribbean regional grouping).

[HCWS1551]

HOME DEPARTMENT


The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 provides extensive privacy safeguards and has established a robust oversight regime with independent mechanisms for redress. The Investigatory Powers Commissioner, the right hon. Lord Justice Fulford, is responsible for overseeing the use of investigatory powers by the intelligence agencies, law enforcement and other public authorities. This oversight includes a programme of inspection and audit by judicial commissioners and inspectors, reporting to the commissioner.

This statement notifies Parliament of compliance risks MI5 identified and reported within certain technology environments used to store and analyse data, including material obtained under the Investigatory Powers Act.

The investigatory powers regime is the subject of ongoing litigation where the Government continue to defend the UK’s legal framework. This does necessarily limit the extent to which it is appropriate for me to comment further on these issues, noting that the Government have, in line with their duty of candour, made the court aware of this issue in relevant litigation. The sensitivity of this issue will also be apparent. The Government will not say anything that could damage national security. To the extent that it is possible to set out in open the nature and context of the material relevant to this issue, I have done so in this statement. Protecting the UK’s national security is my top priority and it is critical that MI5 is able to continue to carry out its vital role.

The compliance risks identified relate to particular safeguards set out in the Investigatory Powers Act in relation to the processing of material that has been obtained under a warrant. Section 53 of the Act—which relates specifically to lawful interception—and parallel provisions for the Act’s other powers require the authority issuing warrants to ensure certain processing is kept to the minimum necessary for the statutory purpose, including the number of people to whom material is made available, the number of copies made and the length of time it is retained. A report of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office suggests that MI5 may not have had sufficient assurance of compliance with these safeguards within one of its technology environments.

As will be clear from the above, the compliance risks identified are limited to how material is treated after it has been obtained. They do not relate in any way to the manner in which MI5 acquires information in the first instance or the necessity and proportionality of doing so. All UK intelligence agencies treat protection of personal information seriously. MI5 has in place internal safeguards concerning the handling of such information and ensures stringent vetting of individuals who will have access to this sensitive material.

The report of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office into these risks concluded that they were serious and required immediate mitigation. The commissioner also expressed concern that MI5 should have reported the compliance risks to him sooner. In response to the commissioner’s report, MI5 has also taken immediate and substantial mitigating actions to address the concerns raised. Work to implement those mitigations is ongoing and is being treated as a matter of the highest priority, both by MI5 and the Home Office. This work is subject to review by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to ensure that sufficient progress is being made.

It is of course paramount that UK intelligence agencies demonstrate full compliance with the law. In that context, the interchange between the commissioner and MI5 on this issue demonstrates that the world leading system of oversight established by the Act is working as it should.

Following his report, the commissioner was satisfied that the mitigating actions put in place by MI5 were sufficient for him to continue lawfully to approve decisions to issue warrants to MI5. I am also clear that none of the risks identified relate in any way to the conduct and integrity of the staff of MI5, who work tirelessly, under considerable pressure and without public recognition, to keep all of us safe.

The work MI5 does is absolutely critical, at a time when the threat from terrorism persists and continues to diversify. And the role of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner and his office is also fundamental to protecting our citizens, ensuring that our operational agencies are able to carry out their vital work in accordance with strict and proportionate privacy safeguards.

Given the importance of these issues, I have established an independent review to consider and report back to me on what lessons can be learned for the future. MI5 will also continue to work closely with the Investigatory...
The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The third quarter TRG meetings took place on 12, 14, 18, 25 and 27 September 2018. The fourth quarter of TRG meetings took place on 4, 6, 10, 11 and 19 December 2018.

Three individuals have been charged with breach of a TPIM notice. Their criminal trials have yet to be heard.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

We have a thriving aviation sector, with competition between airlines delivering choice of destinations and competitive fares for consumers, but occasionally airlines, like any business, do collapse. Over the past decade we have seen two of the largest airline failures in UK history, with the collapse of XL Airways and Monarch Airlines. In both situations, the Government of the day took a decision to ask the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to intervene to assist the repatriation of passengers.

When Monarch collapsed in October 2017, it could have left around 110,000 passengers overseas without a flight back to the UK. Given the specific circumstances and scale of the situation, the Government asked the CAA to launch an operation to ensure that all those abroad were offered an alternative flight to the UK. This involved the UK’s largest peacetime repatriation operation. In total around 85,000 passengers were returned to the UK, with 98% of them travelling on the same day as their original flight.

While this support in both the XL and Monarch situations helped to reduce the detriment for passengers, it also resulted in significant costs to the taxpayer. In the case of the Monarch repatriation, the final cost to the taxpayer has been assessed to be £40.5 million.

Following on from the experience of Monarch, I commissioned an independent airline insolvency review, chaired by Peter Bucks. The review has considered consumer protection in the event of an airline or travel company failure. The final report has been published

Airline Insolvency Review
today. It draws on lessons from the collapse of Monarch Airlines and has considered both repatriation and refund protection to identify options to ensure passengers are protected and identified areas for further work.

We welcome the report and the work performed by Peter and his team. The Government are considering the range of options put forward by the review and will work swiftly to introduce the reforms that are needed to ensure a strong level of consumer protection and value for money for the taxpayer. In doing so we also need to consider the challenges faced by the aviation sector. We would welcome any views on the report’s recommendations and encourage stakeholders to respond as part of the ongoing consultation on Aviation 2050, which closes on 20 June.

Three-year sanctions are rarely used, but I believe that they are counterproductive and ultimately undermine our goal of supporting people into work.

I have reviewed my Department’s internal data, which shows that a six-month sanction already provides a significant incentive for claimants to engage with the labour market regime. I agree with the Work and Pensions Committee that a three-year sanction is unnecessarily long and I feel that the additional incentive provided by a three-year sanction can be outweighed by the unintended impacts to the claimant due to the additional duration. For these reasons, I have now decided to remove three-year sanctions and reduce the maximum sanction length to six months by the end of the year.

Sanctions must be proportionate, particularly for the most vulnerable. The level of a sanction depends on the severity of the claimant’s failure to comply with their work-related requirements. Sanctions escalate for subsequent failures, carrying greater penalties. Under current policy, a claimant on universal credit or jobseeker’s allowance may receive a three-year sanction the third or subsequent time they have failed to comply with a work-related requirement.

Three-year sanctions are rarely used, but I believe that they are counterproductive and ultimately undermine our goal of supporting people into work.

I have reviewed my Department’s internal data, which shows that a six-month sanction already provides a significant incentive for claimants to engage with the labour market regime. I agree with the Work and Pensions Committee that a three-year sanction is unnecessarily long and I feel that the additional incentive provided by a three-year sanction can be outweighed by the unintended impacts to the claimant due to the additional duration. For these reasons, I have now decided to remove three-year sanctions and reduce the maximum sanction length to six months by the end of the year.

It is important that sanctions remain proportionate to ensure they promote the best outcomes. For this reason, the Department is currently carrying out a further evaluation into the effectiveness of UC sanctions at supporting claimants to search for work. I will consider what other improvements can be made following this and inform the House in due course.
Petition

Monday 29 April 2019

OBSERVATIONS

JUSTICE

The Petition of Giovanni Di Stefano

The petition of Giovanni Di Stefano,

Declares that the petitioner is currently held in custody at HMP Highpoint, Stradishall, Suffolk, CB8 9YG and is a national of the Republic of Italy and born on the 1st day of July 1955 in Petrella Tifernina, Campobaso, 86024 Italy. The petitioner is serving a sentence imposed by Southwark Crown Court of 14 years by HHJ McCreath on 27 March 2013. The petitioner is a foreign national prisoner subject to deportation the order of which was served on 27 June 2013. Parliament enacted the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 specifically with S. 34(5) amending the Criminal Justice Act 2003 by inserting S.259A. The purpose Parliament enacted this Act and section was to permit foreign national prisoners and others who had served half the requisite custodial period of any sentence to be removed from this jurisdiction provided that those could satisfy the Secretary of State for Justice that they had “settled intentions” of not returning by residing in the country to which they are removed. Section 259A of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 would come into force on such a day as the Secretary of State may by Order appoint. It is now 11 years since the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 has been enacted. The Secretary of State for Justice has yet to commence this section of sovereign statute that Parliament enacted.

The petitioner thus humbly requests that the House of Commons does press the Secretary of State for Justice to forthwith commence this section which would immediately ease the burden on a much overcrowded prison estate allowing the Home Office to remove all those immediately who gave their settled intention to reside outside this jurisdiction and those who could satisfy the Statute. There is no valid reason why after 11 years the Secretary of State has not commenced this section.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Roger Gale, Official Report, 13 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 7P.]

[PO02439]

Observations from the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):

The Government have the following observations to make:

Section 259A was inserted to the Criminal Justice Act 2003 by Section 34(2) of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008. It was a scheme designed as an extension to the Early Removal Scheme (ERS) for Foreign National Prisoners and would have allowed British nationals, EEA nationals and Irish nationals, who were not subject to a deportation or removal from the UK, and who demonstrated a settled intention to reside permanently outside the UK to be removed from prison up to nine months before they would otherwise be automatically released. It was known as the Early Removal Scheme for Resettlement (ERSR).

The Section 259A provisions were never commenced and were removed from the statute books by Section 118(4)(b) of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 which repealed Section 34(2) of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008.

As such, there are no longer any provisions relating to the ERSR for the Secretary of State for Justice to commence.
Petitions

Thursday 2 May 2019

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Closure and relocation of Solihull Post Office

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.—[Presented by Julian Knight, Official Report, 6 March 2019; Vol. 655, c. 1060.] [P002434]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):

The Government value and recognise the important role that the Post Office plays in communities such as Solihull and across the UK. That is why we committed in our 2017 manifesto to safeguarding the Post Office network and protect existing rural services. Since 2010, the number of branches in the network has been at its most stable for decades, at over 11,500.

While the Post Office is publicly owned, it is a commercial business. The Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office - to maintain a national network accessible to all and to do so more sustainably for the taxpayer - and allow the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business.

The Post Office’s proposals to franchise or host Crown branches, including the Solihull branch, are part of its plans to ensure a sustainable network in the face of challenging trading conditions in the Post Office’s core market and the wider retail sector. In fact, moving Crown post offices to retail partners has helped reduce losses in this part of the network from £46 million per year in 2012 to break-even today. Working with a retail partner is a sensible response to the challenges facing High Street retailers, enabling shared costs across the combined businesses, with the franchise partner benefiting from increased footfall and income from Post Office products. Furthermore, in terms of quality of service and access arrangements a recent report by Citizen’s Advice indicates that franchised branches are performing in line with or better than traditional branches.

We understand that changes to Post Office services will be a concern to some local residents of Solihull, but franchising will help retain Post Office services on high streets throughout the country and bring further investment and modernisation for customers.

WHSmith has been successfully operating post offices within its stores since 2017 and currently runs over 130 branches, demonstrating proficiency to run the branch in Solihull. The franchise arrangement will bring extended opening hours and 7-day trading for customers offering a wide range of products and services.

In relation to accessibility, when relocating a branch, the Post office is aware of the needs of its customers, including the most vulnerable. In fact, the Post Office works with the new partner to ensure that Post Office branches meet all relevant legal accessibility requirements, whether branches are directly managed or franchised within WHSmith, and indeed all franchising partners.

The Post Office has a proven track record for going above and beyond to ensure convenient access for all customers, including those with disabilities or mobility issues. In fact, the Post Office now provides accessibility information on the on-line branch finder. The Post Office also invites the local community to submit comments on access as part of a formal consultation process.

Regarding the Post Office’s consultation in Solihull, this ran for 6 weeks and closed on 6 March 2019. This process sought to inform, and gather views from, opinion formers and local stakeholders on the proposed changes to the network and to allow the public to inform the Post Office’s plans for the new branch. The consultation document highlighted that the branch will be moving approximately 70 metres away from its current location, that opening hours will be extended by eight and a half hours per week and will now include Sunday opening. The document also confirmed that the vast majority of products and services available in the Solihull directly managed branch will transfer to the proposed franchising, with the exception of a cash machine. Although the ATM will not transfer, customers can withdraw money from the Post Office counter as part of the agreement with all the major High Street banks.

The Post Office also runs a customer forum to allow the public to speak to them directly. This process is in line with the Post Office’s Code of Practice on changes to the network agreed with Citizens Advice. A recent review by the Citizens Advice reported that the Post Office consultation process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed in most cases, demonstrating that the Post Office listens to the community.

A final decision by Post Office Limited regarding the proposed move of Solihull Post Office has not been made as of yet. However, once all the responses from the consultation have been reviewed and all feedback considered then the community, staff and concerned parties and individuals will be advised on the decision.

The sustainability and future success of the Post Office network continues to remain of the utmost importance to this Government. We recognise the value Post Offices add to our communities, residents, businesses and tourists in all parts of the UK, including Solihull. We will continue to honour our manifesto commitments so that Post Offices can thrive and remain at the heart of our rural and urban communities for years to come.

Closure of Middleton Crown Post Office

The petition of Heywood and Middleton,

Declares that Crown Post Offices provide a vital service to their communities; further that the Post Office propose to close the Middleton Crown Post Office and to franchise the service to a local branch of WHSmith; further that there is concern that this will adversely affect jobs, quality of service, and accessibility, and
have a negative impact on Middleton town centre; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter has received signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government and Post Office Ltd to keep Middleton Crown Post Office open at its current location.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liz McInnes, Official Report, 13 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 481.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):

The Government value and recognise the important role that the Post Office plays in communities such as Middleton and across the UK. That is why we committed in our 2017 manifesto to safeguarding the Post Office network and protect existing rural services. Since 2010, the number of branches in the network has been at its most stable for decades, at over 11,500.

While the Post Office is publicly owned, it is a commercial business. The Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office - to maintain a national network accessible to all and to do so more sustainably for the taxpayer - and allow the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business.

The Post Office’s proposals to franchise or host Crown branches, including the Middleton branch, are part of its plans to ensure a sustainable network in the face of challenging trading conditions in the Post Office’s core market and the wider retail sector. In fact, moving Crown post offices to retail partners has helped reduce losses in this part of the network from £46 million per year in 2012 to break-even today. Working with a retail partner is a sensible response to the challenges facing High Street retailers, enabling shared costs across the combined businesses, with the franchise partner benefiting from increased footfall and income from Post Office products. Furthermore, in terms of quality of service and access arrangements a recent report by Citizens Advice indicates that franchised branches are performing in line with or better than traditional branches.

We understand that changes to Post Office services will be a concern to some local residents of Middleton, but franchising proposals will help retain Post Office services on high streets throughout the country and bring further investment and modernisation for customers.

WHSmith has been successfully operating post offices within its stores since 2017 and currently runs over 130 branches, demonstrating proficiency to run the branch in Middleton. The franchise arrangement will bring extended opening hours and 7-day trading for customers offering a wide range of products and services.

In relation to accessibility, when relocating a branch, the Post office is aware of the needs of its customers, including the most vulnerable. In fact, the Post Office works with the new partner to ensure that Post Office branches meet all relevant legal accessibility requirements, whether branches are directly managed or franchised within WHSmith, and indeed all franchising partners.

The Post Office has a proven track record for going above and beyond to ensure convenient access for all customers, including those with disabilities or mobility issues. In fact, the Post Office now provides accessibility information on the on-line branch finder. The Post Office also invites the local community to submit comments on access as part of a formal consultation process.

Regarding the Post Office’s consultation in Middleton, this ran for 6 weeks and closed on 6 March 2019. This process sought to inform, and gather views from, opinion formers and local stakeholders on the proposed changes to the network and to allow the public to inform the Post Office’s plans for the new branch. The consultation process highlighted that the branch will be moving approximately 170 metres away from its current location, that opening hours will be extended by nine hours per week and will now include Sunday opening.

The Post Office also held a customer forum on 13 February to allow the public to speak to them directly. This process is in line with the Post Office’s Code of Practice on changes to the network agreed with Citizens Advice. A recent review by the Citizens Advice report that the Post Office consultation process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed in most cases, demonstrating that the Post Office listens to the community.

Following the consultation and review, Post Office Limited has made the decision to proceed with the proposal to move the Middleton Post Office into WHSmith High Street Limited has made the decision to proceed with the proposal to move the Middleton Post Office into WHSmith at Unit G9 F9 Middleton Shopping Centre, Middleton, Manchester, M24 4EL where it will be operated by WHSmith High Street Limited. It is expected that the current branch will close at 17:30 on Wednesday 5 June 2019, with the new branch opening at 09:00 on Thursday 6 June 2019.

The sustainability and future success of the Post Office network remain of the utmost importance to the Government. We recognise their value to communities, residents, businesses and tourists in all parts of the UK, including Middleton. We will continue to honour our manifesto commitments so that Post Offices’ can thrive and remain at the heart of our rural and urban communities.
Petitions

Tuesday 7 May 2019

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

The future of maintained nursery schools

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Freshfield Nursery School in Heaton Mersey, Stockport.

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitions therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure maintained nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Ann Coffey, Official Report, 29 March 2019; Vol. 657, c. 5P.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim 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.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Gibraltar representation in the Houses of Parliament, Westminster

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.—[Presented by Andrew Rosindell, Official Report, 27 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 460.]

Observations from the Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):

We believe that the 2006 Gibraltar Constitution—which was endorsed via a referendum by the people of Gibraltar—provides for a modern, mature and appropriate relationship with the UK. Gibraltar has a vigorous parliamentary democracy with institutions based on the Westminster model, and has responsibility for almost everything apart from foreign affairs, defence, internal security and some public appointments.

In addition, the UK Government believe that adequate mechanisms already exist for the people and the Government of Gibraltar to express their views. As well as the strong relationship between UK and Gibraltar Ministers, there is the all-party parliamentary group for Gibraltar which is proactive in raising the views of Gibraltar in parliamentary debates. The Government of Gibraltar attends the Joint Ministerial Council (JMC) for the Overseas Territories, which meets at least once per year and enables Ministers and representatives of Overseas Territories to register their points with the UK Government. In the context of leaving the European Union, the Government of Gibraltar also meets with the UK Government in the Joint Ministerial Council (Gibraltar EU Negotiations), which has met nine times since 2016, most recently in April 2019.

In summary, the UK Government believe that the fundamentals of our constitutional relationship are right but we remain as always open to dialogue on any proposals put forward by the Government of Gibraltar.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 30 April 2019

INTERNATIONAL TRADE
EU Customs Union

The following is an extract from oral questions to the Secretary of State for International Trade on Thursday 25 April 2019.

Nick Smith: Some 9,000 people work in the Welsh steel industry, so can I ask the Secretary of State to think again, and support a permanent customs union and commit to a common external tariff on steel imports to support steel jobs in south Wales?

Dr Fox: No, I will not commit to that. I have set out the reasons why I believe the application of a common external tariff will be limiting on the UK’s ability to carry out an independent trade policy. What I would say is that we already have the Trade Remedies Authority up and running, and that is the best way to deal with any disputes over steel through WTO rules.


Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for International Trade:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith).

The correct response should have been:

Dr Fox: No, I will not commit to that. I have set out the reasons why I believe the application of a common external tariff will be limiting on the UK’s ability to carry out an independent trade policy. What I would say is that we have already established our trade remedies functionality, and that is the best way to deal with any disputes over steel through WTO rules.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 1 May 2019

EDUCATION

School Funding

The following is an extract from the Back-Bench debate on School Funding on Thursday 25 April 2019.

Nick Gibb: I listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton); as a neighbouring MP, I find I always do. He will be aware that funding in his constituency has risen by 5.5% per pupil compared with 2017. That is one of the highest increases and reflects the historical underfunding of West Sussex schools—something the national funding formula was introduced to address. He referred to teachers’ pay, which is due to rise by 3.5% for teachers on the main pay scale and by 2% for those on the upper pay scale.


Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards:

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Nick Gibb: I listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton); as a neighbouring MP, I find I always do. He will be aware that funding in his constituency has risen by 5.5% per pupil compared with 2017. That is one of the highest increases and reflects the historical underfunding of West Sussex schools—something the national funding formula was introduced to address. He referred to teachers’ pay, which has risen by 3.5% for teachers on the main pay scale and by 2% for those on the upper pay scale.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 7 May 2019

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

World Immunisation Week

The following is an extract from the debate on World Immunisation Week on Thursday 2 May 2019.

Rory Stewart: We have worked out how to use the fact that Britain is the global leader in Gavi. Britain puts in 25% of the funds for this extraordinary global programme of vaccination. The second biggest contributor is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the third biggest is the Government of the United States.


Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for International Development:

An error has been identified in my speech during the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Rory Stewart: We have worked out how to use the fact that Britain is the global leader in Gavi. Britain puts in 25% of the funds for this extraordinary global programme of vaccination. The second biggest contributor is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the third biggest is the Government of Norway, and the United States is fourth.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 8 May 2019

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Climate Change

The following is an extract from oral questions to the Secretary of State for International Development on Wednesday 1 May 2019.

Dan Carden: I wonder whether the Minister will today commit to auditing and publishing UK aid spending on fossil fuels through the CDC, the prosperity fund and multilateral organisations?

Harriett Baldwin: I am pretty sure that a lot of that information is already in the public domain. I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman my understanding that the CDC has made no new investments in fossil fuels since 2012.


Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for International Development:

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden).

The correct response should have been:

Harriett Baldwin: I am pretty sure that a lot of that information is already in the public domain. I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that the CDC has made no new investments in coal since 2012.
Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 9 May 2019

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE
China: UK Policy

The following is an extract from a Westminster Hall debate on China: UK Policy on Tuesday 7 May 2019.

Mark Field: As many Members may know, Huawei has had a long-standing joint venture with BT going back almost a decade and a half. Arguably, those who oppose Huawei having any more involvement will have to recognise that that has already been worked through. The extensive review that we now have will go far beyond individual vendors or countries.


Letter of correction 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 my reply to the debate.

The correct wording should have been:

Mark Field: As many Members may know, Huawei has had a long-standing joint venture with BT going back almost a decade and a half. Arguably, those who oppose Huawei being involved will have to recognise that that has already been worked through. The extensive review that we now have will go far beyond individual vendors or countries.

EDUCATION
Tuition Fees: EU Students

The following is an extract from the urgent question on Tuition Fees: EU Students on Monday 29 April 2019.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Does my hon. Friend agree that, generally speaking, the rule the Government should adopt, given the unfortunate decision that this country has taken to leave the European Union and in order to make our way in the world to the greatest advantage, is that we must retain a very open system to allow the brightest and the best to come and study here from all over the world at equal rates of charging, but also with a regime that allows them to stay here and work in an orderly, sensible manner that is easily enforced?

Chris Skidmore: From the international perspective of the United Kingdom’s universities, I entirely agree that we now have the highest ever number of applications from foreign countries—about 158,000.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation:

An error has been identified in my response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames).

The correct response should have been:

Chris Skidmore: From the international perspective of the United Kingdom’s universities, I entirely agree that we now have the highest ever number of applicants from foreign countries—about 134,000.